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how Evangelical Congregations Deal with Single
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Single Parents in Evangelical Churches
A Study of how Evangelical Congregations Deal with
Single Parenthood

By

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A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE UNIVERSITY OF DURHAM IN
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Abstract

This thesis focuses on representations and experiences of single parents in Evangelical congregations and the wider literature. There has been significant growth in the numbers of single parents in the UK over the last forty years, but they have usually not been included in sociological studies on the subject of religion.

What follows is a congregational study of two churches in the North East of England, together with an examination of the relevant literature. It is focused primarily on qualitative data gained through interviews and observation, although reference has been made, where appropriate, to official statistics.

The aim of the thesis was to explore how evangelical congregations deal with the issue of single parenthood.

The main conclusions reached were that whilst they are more visible within small group situations, where support is commonly given, single parents seem to be rendered somewhat invisible by the dominant ideals expressed in larger congregational settings. Single parents appear to benefit from a qualitative, as opposed to quantitative, approach to measuring the success of a group or congregation; the former takes a holistic approach, whereas the latter is primarily concerned with numerical growth and conversions.

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Introduction and Methodology

Why Single Parents and the Church?

A search involving the terms 'single parents', 'lone parents' or 'single mothers', and 'the church', reveals that there is almost no published research relating the two. The academy has previously looked at lone parents primarily in terms of their economic situation and the impact of this upon the government, or through the lens of the sociology of the family, but not in relation to their place and role in the church. There have been some theorists who have acknowledged the *need* for both the church and the academy to engage with single parents, such as Peter Brierley and Penny Long Marler.¹ However, there has not been research conducted thus far that treats single parents as a discreet group. Nevertheless, it is important that both the church and academy take this area of study seriously.

The *Social Trends* reports produced by the Office for National Statistics have shown that over the last twenty years, a fairly static figure of around twenty percent of all families with dependent children in England and Wales are single parent families.² This represents a steep rise compared to the situation forty years ago. Thus, if we are interested in the way families interact with religious institutions, and seek to understand patterns of religiosity and the transmission of faith, we need to include single parent families in such research, acknowledging them as a discreet category. Moreover, if we wish to look at how ecclesiology has changed in reaction to secularisation, or to study missiology in our modern context, we need to acknowledge the impact of this change in terms of the proportion of single parent families.

Furthermore, in the development of the various strands of Christian feminist research, this is a topic which has been overlooked. Whilst some research has been done on issues relating to single women in the church, it has not differentiated adequately

¹ See Brierley, P, (ed), *UK Christian Handbook Religious Trends 5 2005/2006*, London, Christian Research, (2005) or Marler, P, *Lost in the Fifties, The Changing Family and the Nostalgic Church*, within TatomAmmerman, N, and Roof, W, (edS), *Work Family and Religion in Contemporary Society*, London, Routledge, (1994), pp. 23-60 for specific examples.

² Beaumont, J, (ed), *Households and Families, Social Trends 41*, <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/search/index.html?newquery=Social+Trends+41+%2B+Family> (accessed 13/8/11).

between those with children and those without.³ Much Christian research, meanwhile, has focused on the place of women in Evangelical congregations, either as leaders or in terms of the gendered roles that are promoted in the home and church.⁴ Within all of these examples, the focus is upon either married or single women, but not on those single women with children.

Personal Reflexivity

I come to this research not just from an academic perspective, but as someone whose desire to study the topic of single parents in Evangelical churches has arisen from their own journey as a Christian single parent from an Evangelical background, looking to discover how to engage in effective mission to this group in society. Moreover, I come to this research recognising that one explanation cannot be used to describe the experience of all women.⁵ Thus, it is important to me to highlight that there are many different groups of women in society, and thus in churches, whose experiences will be different according to their age, ethnicity, class, geographical location, marital status and whether or not they have children, and also to note that the experience of men cannot be ignored. Finally, I bring to this research a knowledge of sociology, and the ability to use its tools to look at matters of ecclesiology and missiology, and thus to attempt to help the church engage more effectively with the situation in which it finds itself.

The result of coming from these perspectives is that I am committed to conducting qualitative research, which as the practical theologians Swinton and Mowat point out, “does not seek to solve the problem or ‘crack the case’”. Rather, in this approach based on grounded theory, the researcher seeks to give the “story about the situation as well and as accurately as she can, to create her evidence convincingly”.⁶ This is what I have sought to do, and I cannot, and do not, pretend that I am going to be able

³See. Aune, K, *Single Women: Challenge to the Church?*, Carlisle, Paternoster Press, (2003) and Aune, K, Sharma, S and Vincett, G (ed), *Women and Religion in the West : Challenging Secularization*, Aldershot, Ashgate, (2008) for example.

⁴See Gallagher, S, “*The Marginalization of Evangelical Feminism*”, *Sociology of Religion*, (2004), 65:3, pp. 215-237 for example.

⁵Aronson, P, *Feminists or “Postfeminists”?: Young Women’s Attitudes toward Feminism and Gender Relations*, within *Gender and Society*, Vol 17, No 6 (Dec 2003) pp903 – 922 explains how my theoretical perspective and view of feminism may be linked to the age cohort of which I am a part .

⁶ Swinton,J and Mowat, H, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, London, SCM Press, (2006), p30.

to come to a definitive conclusion. I aim to use appropriate research tools to see what the story of single parents in specific Evangelical churches is, and using the data this approach yields, explain the situation and their representations as effectively as possible.

At the beginning of my study, anecdotal evidence from single parents who were church members, obtained prior to starting the research, indicated that the situation for single parents within churches is complex and their experience is often more positive than imagined. This contrasted sharply with the perceptions of many church leaders; when told of the research topic, a common response was, 'Well, that's not going to be very good, is it?', as though this is an acknowledged fact. This research seeks to investigate what the actual situation is, and how this might be linked to the theology of the churches in question. Evangelical churches are the focus of this study because of their tendency to take a more conservative view of the family; this will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

Additionally, as my own denominational background was closer to that of one church than the other, it has proven necessary to take care in ensuring that my personal bias does not influence the research; this I believe I have successfully accomplished.

Methodology

Introduction

Participant observation was at the heart of this ethnographic study. In order to understand why I used a wider set of methodological processes which are consistent with grounded theory, it is useful to begin by going back to the work of Howard Becker, whose work in this field is widely recognised as influential and in many ways definitive. Becker cites Raymond L. Gold's definition of participant observation as being where, "[t]he participant observer gathers data by participating in the daily life of the group or organization he studies", and then unpacks this by continuing, "[h]e watches the people he is studying to see what situations they ordinarily meet and how they behave in them. He enters into conversation with all or some of the participants in these situations and discovers their interpretations of the events he has observed".⁷ While being somewhat of a mainstream and of its time in relation to the gendered language, this quotation sums

⁷ See Becker, H, 'Problems of Inference and Proof in Participant Observation', *American Sociological Review*, 23:6, (1958), p652. Within this the work Becker cites comes from, Gold, R, 'Roles in Sociological Field Observations', *Social Forces*, 36, (1958), pp 217 -233.

up what was at the centre of my methodology. I was indeed observing the daily life of both congregations through both corporate worship and small groups. In both settings, I was watching people and then interviewing them, or talking informally with them trying to discover their interpretations of the events I had observed. I was then able to focus more closely on the way these interpretations related to the way single parents were viewed within, or experienced, these congregations.

The methodology employed in the research is consistent with the grounded theory approach outlined above. Strauss and Corbin describe grounded theory as being research where “the researcher begins with an area of study and allows the theory to emerge from the data.”⁸ In this case the area of study was single parents in Evangelical congregations. The theory and conclusions I reached emerged from analysing the data I collected from two contrasting Evangelical congregations, which both contained single parents. I conducted participant observation of services and small groups, surveyed the literature and websites, interviewed single parents, church leaders and other members of those congregations. I attended a parenting course in one church and joined the other on their anniversary pilgrimage, as well as attending their annual general meeting and a separate church meeting.

Throughout the course of this study, much tea was drunk and many cakes and biscuits eaten; the informal conversation which accompanied the refreshments was also a valuable source of information. In addition to this, the administrator in one of the churches supplied information on its membership and talked me through it; in the other, a wider list was supplied which included non-members with whom the church was in contact, and the small groups’ pastor was my guide through this set of data.

While some interviews took place in the homes of the interviewees or in coffee shops, the majority were conducted in the church buildings. The rooms used differed according to the interviewee and what was appropriate.

It was after I had conducted the fieldwork that I was able to analyse the data and draw conclusions. These conclusions offered insight into how a range of issues including attitudes towards female leadership, the focus of small groups and approaches to church growth impacted upon the experiences of single parents within the two Evangelical congregations studied.

⁸ Strauss, A and Corbin, J, *Basics of Qualitative Research Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*, London, Sage Publications, (1998) p12.

While the research focused on only two congregations and so the sample can be argued to lack representativeness I believe that the comparative nature of the study helps make it possible to identify some aspects of congregational life which impact the experience of single parents within evangelical congregations.

Research Process

Frances Ward identifies the four stages that this type of ethnographic research requires: initial entry into the field, the time of participation, writing up and withdrawal from the congregation, and finally the time when the text is completed.⁹ For these stages to be journeyed through successfully, the researcher needs to have certain skills which Corbin and Strauss have defined as the “characteristics of a grounded theorist.”¹⁰ To differing levels I found myself displaying all of these characteristics over the course of the study.

The first step of the process was, therefore, to identify churches with single parents in their congregations and which were reachable by public transport on Sunday mornings and evenings. These practical factors limited the possibilities; an initially promising conversation with one pastor did not lead anywhere, as there were very few single parents in the congregation. In order to find a suitable church, one needed to look for those which were Evangelical and either located in an area known to contain a number of single parents, or sufficiently large as to be likely to be a more diverse congregation. Church websites were a useful starting point, but the breakthrough came after speaking to a local church leader also studying in the Theology Department. He provided a list of potential congregations, and gave permission for his name to be used when making contact.

Two contrasting congregations were thus found, and after completing initial interviews with the senior pastor of each, in order to establish the nature and purpose of the study, it was possible to commence fieldwork. They identified single parents that they felt it would be appropriate to interview and these people provided initial contacts. The University’s ethics process was followed at all times to ensure that the conduct of the

⁹Ward, F, *The Messiness of Studying Congregations using Ethnographic Methods*, in Guest, M et al, *Congregational Studies in the UK*, Aldershot, Ashgate, (2004).

¹⁰ The six characteristics of a grounded theorist Strauss, A and Corbin, J, *Basics of Qualitative Research*, p7 identify are: “1. The ability to step back and critically analyse situations, 2. The ability to recognize the tendency towards bias, 3. The ability to think abstractly, 4. The ability to be flexible and open to helpful criticism, 5. Sensitivity to the words and actions of the respondents and 6. A sense of absorption and devotion to the work process”.

study was appropriate. Moreover, the leaders of both congregations gave their consent for this research to be conducted, and all interviewees gave their informed consent.

The leader of the single parents' group in the small town church was one of the first interviewees, and she encouraged others to take part in the study, through making positive comments about the research and distributing information sheets to group members. Other interviewees were encountered through *Christianity Explored*, (a short course run by one congregation to introduce people to the Christian faith), and small groups, or were church attendees known to me via external networks.

After interviewing those on the initial list provided in the city centre congregation, other single parents were encountered through observations, and after checking with the assistant pastor that interviewing them was appropriate. On one occasion, it became clear through observations and discussions that there was a single parent with whom it would have been useful to speak, but it was regarded as inappropriate because of pastoral and ethical issues relating to their personal circumstances. Despite appeals during the church meeting, it was not possible to persuade married people with younger children to agree to be interviewed – all of the married interviewees in this congregation had adult children. The reason for this appeared to be the time pressures they faced due to work commitments – they were either teachers or medical professionals.

An important part of this research was the observation of both Sunday services, during which notes were made, and small group meetings. In the latter, whether my presence was overt (as was always the case in the city centre church) or covert depended on the decision of the group leader; for example, in some of the *Christianity Explored* groups in the small town church, I was asked not to announce my presence as a researcher to other members of the group who weren't in leadership roles. In such situations, it was possible to take notes, but this was mostly done either in a side-room immediately following the meetings or while waiting for transport home. This ensured that one's recollections were as accurate as possible.

Throughout the course of the research, it proved necessary to re-visit some early assumptions. For example, it appeared at first that the city centre church was affiliated to a particular para-church organisation; this turned out not to be the case. With the small town church, it became apparent later on that the dominant practices in relation to gender were being challenged through the operating practice of several small groups. Moreover, it took some time to get used to the norms and practices in the small town

church (for example, when to stand and sit during worship), but this was less of an issue in the city centre church because of its being part of a denomination with which I was already familiar. In other words, a process of adaptation was necessary in order to carry out the study effectively.

Furthermore, it became clear over time that it would not be possible to study two churches simultaneously and effectively; it made it difficult to build contacts and really get under the skin of the congregations. Consequently, each church was studied for a block of time, and this involved not just attending Sunday worship but also observing small groups and one-off events, and just spending time in the churches. I attended the parent and toddler groups; in the city centre church, it was possible to wander around freely, whereas things were more structured in the small town church. It was, however, difficult to identify single parents in both cases, as the leadership were not sure who was and wasn't a single parent, so it was hard to determine who to approach.

It proved useful to sit in the foyer area of the city centre church, which was regularly opened for people to come in and chat, as well as observing several church- and house-based small groups. The intense period of observation in the small town church was more formally structured, and involved attending occasional meetings and a tour around the bible study groups, as well as sustained periods of time completing *Christianity Explored* and *Visionary Parenting* courses. Social events associated with the *Christianity Explored* courses were observed; these included a trip to Holy Island.

During the period of intense research in the city centre church (the second congregation observed), all three paid ministers in the small town church resigned, and it was not possible to ascertain the reason for their departure. This necessitated requesting continued access to the congregation from one of the eldership, which was granted without problems. However, it means that the observations of, and interviews with, the paid leadership relate only to the period they led the congregation. One of the leaders gave a follow-up interview after he had left the church, and while he did not volunteer any information on why the resignations had occurred, he did provide insight into his view of the culture in the congregation.

Finally, while I sporadically attended both churches after my periods of intense research, personal issues meant that this was less frequent than would have been ideal. This may be one reason why the number of interviewees was well below what I had originally hoped. Furthermore, my withdrawal from each congregation was less gradual than initially anticipated.

During the fieldwork, and continuing on afterwards, I sifted through the rich descriptive data I had using a system of conceptual ordering, again a feature of grounded theory, in order to organise the data into a set of discrete categories which would enable me to draw conclusions. The key categories which emerged were: past and present influences on congregational ethos and identity, features of Evangelical identity, leadership issues related to structure, leadership issues related to gender, approaches to small groups, involvement with para-church groups and outside agencies, attitudes of single parents and attitudes towards single parents. The benefits of this conceptual ordering can be seen most clearly in the sub-headings of the chapter comparing the two congregations.¹¹ The conclusions reached in relation to each of these key categories also enable the research to have some level of general representativeness. This is because looking at each category enables different congregations to be compared against those congregations studied. While both the congregations studied are unique their approaches to small groups, women in leadership and involvement with para-church groups, for example, are not.

Data Sample

The interviews conducted in the city centre congregation were as follows:

- One male single parent
- Three female single parents
- One elderly woman, who was previously a single parent
- Two senior leaders (both married)
- Church administrator (married)
- One married couple, who were both involved heavily in the church and were interviewed together
- Two single members of the congregation without children.

The interviews conducted in the small town congregation were as follows:

- One male single parent
- Two female single parents
- One male, who had been a single parent but had remarried

¹¹ See Strauss, A and Corbin, J, *Basics of Qualitative Research*, pp19 -21 for a wider discussion on the nature and benefits of conceptual ordering.

- Two females who had been single parents but had remarried. They were, or had been, part of the single parents' group
- One woman who had been a single parent but was now remarried; she had not been part of that congregation when she was a single parent
- One divorced older woman whose children were adult when she became single
- Three senior leaders, who all resigned from the church during the study period
- A personal assistant within the church (married)
- One married woman involved in leading a small group
- One single woman without children
- One married man whose daughter had been a teenage single mother
- Two married couples.

While the sample was therefore relatively small, it was varied in terms of the life experiences of the interviewees. However, it was an exclusively White British sample, and so it is not possible to comment on issues of ethnicity, which could be an important factor, as the level of single parenthood is disproportionately high in the Afro-Caribbean community.

Literature Review

Defining Single Parents

We begin by examining the definition of 'single parent families', and UK official statistics displaying their socio-economic profile; this will clarify the terms of reference in this thesis and help illustrate both how the official figures for the percentage of the population who are single parents are calculated, and how this demographic has changed over recent decades. All this will identify the relevance of treating single parents as a distinct social group, and the extent to which they can be thought of as a homogeneous demographic.

To discover the most appropriate definition of single parents, it is necessary to review literature produced by the government, charities and those working in the field of social policy. Karen Rawlingson and Stephen McKay are social action theorists who have investigated the diversity and dynamics of lone parents, particularly mothers. The main themes of their study are: (i) the range of different ways in which people become lone parents and (ii) the likelihood of them remaining so for differing periods of time. They also look at the different stages of experience involved in being a lone parent. This study involved using an analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data, including interviews. Their definition and use of the term 'lone parent' described those who are "not living with a partner, but are living with dependent children".¹²

As they progress through their study, they discuss the ways in which that definition is more problematic than it first appears. The reasons for this primarily relate to how "living with a partner" and "dependent children" are defined. They also differentiate in their work between single lone parents (that is, lone parents who were not living with a partner when they had their children) and separated lone parents (those people who were previously in a marriage or co-habiting relationship). The overall conclusions of this study are that there has been a rise in both single and separated lone parents and that for a significant number in both categories, this will only be a temporary state of being. They also found that lone mothers saw both advantages and disadvantages to their lone parent status.

While the study provides a useful basis for examining the types of lone parents and the processes involved in their experiences, it does have some problems. Firstly, it only

¹² Rawlingson, K and McKay, S, *The Growth of Lone Parenthood. Diversity and Dynamics*, London, Policy Studies Institute, (1998). p23.

concentrates on lone mothers. This is because they recognise that lone fathers only make up a small number of single parents and that their experiences are likely to be different. This is problematic, because if one regards lone parents to be a marginalised group in society, then lone fathers can be doubly marginalised, if studies such as this choose to view them as statistically too insignificant to be included.

Secondly, while examining a range of routes into lone parenthood, they concentrate on four avenues: the separation of a married couple with dependents, the separation of cohabiting couples with dependent children, cases of widowhood, and single non-cohabiting women without dependants giving birth as a result of natural conception outside a relationship. It is recognised that this study is now slightly dated, and it ignores two small but applicable categories that now exist: women who become single mothers as a result of adoption or via artificial insemination. This is a problem because the implication of examining those particular categories is that lone parenthood is generally unplanned and normally unwanted.

'Lone parent' is also the term in the UK official statistics relating to single parents. The most recent statistics can be found in *Social Trends*. The data contained in this Office for National Statistics publication uses a definition of lone parent households which includes those with dependent and/or non-dependent children living with one parent. The key statistical data regarding lone parent households contained in the most recent *Social Trends* reports (38 -41) shows that in the UK, "the proportion of children living with one parent has more than trebled over the past 35 years to 23 per cent in 2007," and that eleven percent of all households in the UK are now lone parent families.¹³

This rapid increase in the level of single parents in the last three decades, particularly during the 1980s, matters because it means that, while single parents have always existed, they were not previously such a numerically significant part of society. Over the last fifteen years, the percentage has remained fairly constant, with nearly a quarter of all dependent children, at any time, now living with one parent. This produces a new set of challenges for all institutions in society, including churches. The pace at which the size of this demographic has grown, as well as other factors, means that there is little existing work relating to the position of single parents in churches in the UK

Analysing *Social Trends*³⁹ data indicates how single parents are a diverse group of people, and how one needs to take into account a range of other socio-economic

¹³ Self, A (ed), *Social Trends No 38*, Office for National Statistics, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, (2008), accessed via http://www.statistics.gov.uk/downloads/theme_social/Social_Trends38/Social_Trends_38.pdf. Chapter 2, is the earliest edition of *Social Trends* used within this research, Beaumont, J, (ed), *Households and Families, Social Trends 41*, <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/search/index.html?newquery=Social+Trends+41+%2B+Family> (accessed 13/8/11) is the most recent edition.

variables when studying them. Firstly, they are not evenly distributed amongst all ethnic groups. In black and mixed ethnicity groups, the likelihood of a dependent child being in a lone parent family is higher than the average (at 48% and 39% respectively), while amongst Asian families it is lower (at 13%).

Secondly, lone parents are far less likely to be educated to degree level or higher than other groups (only 11% of all lone parents with dependent children are graduates, compared to 23% for married/co-habiting parents with dependent children, and 20% for those without dependent children), yet they can be found across the full spectrum of educational backgrounds.

Equally, while they are disproportionately likely to be unemployed (12% for those with dependent children, compared to 3% for married/cohabiting parents with dependent children, and 6% for single people without dependents), lone parents can be found in all economic categories. This data is useful, because it shows how issues of class and ethnicity may be linked to the representations and experiences of single parents.

While 'lone parent' is the main official term used in the UK by government and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), such as Gingerbread, and is reflected in academic work looking at social policy, there is no consistent agreement upon whether this is the correct term to be used in other academic disciplines. References to lone parent and single parent families are found both in Sociology and Theology. Such a diverse use of language to describe those parents who do not have a partner is problematic: should we follow the norm in social policy work and use the UK 'official' term of lone parents, or move to the alternative term of single parents, which seems to be the preferred term in the study of religion, particularly in North American studies?

Unless referring to a piece of work that itself uses the alternative term of 'lone parents', we will use the notation 'single parents', as many people see themselves as both single and as parents. This usage reflects Tuula Gordon's finding, in her feminist study on the social construction of singleness, that many single mothers regard themselves more in terms of being "single women who have children, than as 'single mothers'."¹⁴ This distinction is important, because it allows women to be seen in terms of both their marital status, as individuals, and through their relationship with their children. 'Lone parent' does not allow this same distinction to be made.

¹⁴ Gordon, T, *Single Women On the Margins?*, Basingstoke, The Macmillan Press Ltd, (1994), p. 44.

Evangelical Churches and their Characteristics

The reasons for focusing on Evangelical churches are twofold. Firstly, these are a group of churches that, historically, have had a somewhat contradictory relationship with women and with issues of social exclusion. On the one hand, they have tended to place an emphasis on male leadership and headship, and the role of women as mothers. This has been condemned by many, particularly by Feminists and Marxists, as patriarchal and oppressive. On the other hand, the emphasis in these churches on activism has seen, at various points in history, engagement in a range of campaigns intended to benefit women and families. Callum Brown notes how this activist role was one in which women were identified as being particularly well suited to and involved in, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹⁵ With the re-politicisation of Evangelicalism in the late twentieth century, which particularly focused on issues relating to the family, this activism may be argued to have re-emerged. This has led to a contradictory relationship between women and Evangelicalism, which is as complex as it is interesting.

Secondly, in the UK, Evangelicals have, in recent years, held an increasingly strong position in both the established church and the free churches, as Rob Warner and others have indicated.¹⁶ In a more explicitly secularised society, this position has been gaining enhanced currency.

To establish what is meant by an Evangelical church, we begin by looking at David Bebbington's work, which is widely recognised as yielding the 'standard' definition.¹⁷ His historical study on *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain* identifies four specific aspects of Evangelicalism: *conversionism*, *activism*, *Biblicism* and *crucicentrism*.¹⁸ He argues that the emphasis placed on them has changed over time and differs between strands. Moreover, the way in which they are expressed differs according to where and when one is examining them; such differences of expression are linked to the influence of wider environmental and cultural factors. Thus, it will be necessary to identify which elements of the quadrilateral are dominant, to see how they influence the way single

¹⁵ Brown, C, *The Death of Christian Britain Second Edition*, Abingdon, Routledge, (2009), p. 68.

¹⁶ Warner, R, *Reinventing English Evangelicalism 1966 – 2001 A Theological and Sociological Study*, Milton Keynes, Paternoster, (2007), pp48-49 contains tables giving the denominational membership of the Evangelical Alliance in 1995 and 2001.

¹⁷ Guest, M, *Evangelical Identity and Contemporary Culture A Congregational Study in Innovation*, Milton Keynes, Paternoster, (2007), Warner (2007) and Jamieson, A, *A Churchless Faith. Faith Journeys Beyond the Churches*, London, SPCK, (2003) amongst others use this definition as the basis for defining Evangelicalism within their work.

¹⁸ Bebbington, D, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730's to the 1980's*, London, Routledge, (1999).

parents are viewed and treated. It will be equally relevant to look at the position of single parents in wider society, to see how this may have impacted their experience in Evangelical churches.

Following on from Bebbington's research, Rob Warner and Mathew Guest have both produced studies which have looked at the contemporary state of Evangelicalism in the UK. Warner does this, primarily, by tracing the development of the Evangelical Alliance and its influence between 1966 and 2001. He also conducted two case studies; one of Spring Harvest (a Christian festival), and the other of the *Alpha* Course. He sought to assess how successful the Evangelical tradition was at end of the last century, and how it might move forward into the twenty-first century. Guest's research is concerned with how individuals in Evangelical congregations relate a range of cultural and social forces to their individual and collective identities. Guest focused his research on one church that had two types of congregation associated with it; one was engaged in mainstream church, and the other was an alternative worship group.

Despite their different emphases, these two studies complement one another and reinforce several points about Evangelicalism at the beginning of the twenty-first century in the UK. The first, to which Brasher refers in her study of Fundamentalism in the US, is that Evangelicalism is both a tradition and a movement. As a theological tradition, it has the central tenants which Bebbington described, and can thus be used as a unifying term. However, as a movement, it has experienced historical waves and sometimes conflicting agendas. Secondly, there is a diversity of thought in Evangelicalism, which is increasingly being highlighted by differences between the traditional (conservative) wing, the 'entrepreneurs' (as Warner classes them) who are often associated with broad Evangelicalism, and the progressive Evangelicals who are often associated with the Emerging Church movement and post-Evangelicalism. This study will focus on the experience of single parents in churches rather than para-church organisations and alternative worship groups, and so will be more concerned with 'traditional' and 'entrepreneurial' Evangelicalism.

These theorists and others have identified the way that Evangelical churches are split between those more closely aligned with traditional denominations, and those which associated with 'new church' streams. Joseph Tamney's study of five congregations included two which illustrate this division. Both were conservative Evangelical churches, but one was more focused on Spirit, and the other on Truth. The Spirit-based church was charismatic in nature, and had a restorationist theology, reflecting that of many of the 'new churches'. The 'Truth church' was more Calvinist in its theology and solemn in

character, with a strong institutional and denominational outlook.¹⁹ That is not to say that denominational churches are not also charismatic; indeed, many which are part of the established denominations do use charismatic practices, but it is more often a prominent part of the 'new churches'.

In addition to the above, Carroll and Roof's work, which looked at generational differences within churches and synagogues, both Evangelical and non-Evangelical, identified three types of church with differing approaches. The *traditional* congregation in this definition is highly indebted to inherited traditions, while the *blended* congregation is characterised by a range of programs intended to cater to the needs of different generational groups in a church. Finally, they identify generation-specific congregations.²⁰ Using these categories to compliment the above analysis, we can see that the focus will be on the traditional and the blended which are more likely to match the profile of 'the entrepreneurs' mentioned previously.

A final method of classification, which again does not relate to specifically Evangelical congregations, comes from Penny Becker, who looked at *Congregations in Conflict*. She argued that different churches have varying ideals, and these differentiate congregations. The four categories she identified are the 'house of worship' model, the 'family' model, the 'congregation; model, and the 'leader' model.²¹ These are not specifically related to particular strands of thought and practice, but the descriptions given by Warner and by Carroll and Roof mean that we can identify the 'house of worship' model as being more closely associated with the traditional churches and the 'congregation' model with the 'entrepreneurs'/'blended' churches. The 'family' model could be argued to fit both, although, due to its more inter-generational nature, it is more likely to be found in blended churches.

These comparative, ethnographic studies sought to compare and contrast the characteristics of different congregations. In creating their different categories, the researchers focused on the analysis of different elements; Warner and Tamney, by contrast, concentrated more on differences in emphasis in theology and worship. Carroll and Roof focused on the age groups in the congregations, while Becker looked at personal relationships and practice. Therefore, when looking for contrasting

¹⁹Tamney, J, *The Resilience of Conservative Religion, The Case of Popular, Protestant Congregations*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, (2002).

²⁰ Carroll, J and Roof, W, *Bridging Divided Worlds Generational Cultures in Congregations*, San Francisco, Jossey –Bass, (2002).

²¹ Becker, P,E, *Congregations in Conflict: Cultural Models of Local Religious Life*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, (1999).

congregations, one has to decide which divisions to focus upon. The experience of single parents may well differ not only according to the age, ethnicity, gender or class, but also according to the type of Evangelical church they attend; this can be described in a variety of ways.

Religious Attendance and Secularisation among Single Parents

The level of religious participation among single parents in English churches has been identified by Peter Brierley as being proportionally lower than that of the population at large. In his study of the results of the 2005 English Church Census, Brierley calculated that approximately 6% of all families with dependent children who attend church are single parent families.²² However, marital status was not something which the English Church Census asked about, and so Brierley directs the reader back to a figure in *Social Trends 5* (2005/2006), from which it is, unfortunately, not clear how this calculation has been performed.²³

While we can use this together with data from the *Church Life Profile* study to suggest that single parents are under-represented, the figures should be treated with caution. Particular care should be taken when looking for trends in the attendance rate of single parents, because this is an area where a careful analysis of black majority churches would be required to draw clear conclusions. Data from Brierley from 2006, and elsewhere, shows that black churches are those growing at the fastest rate. As mentioned in our discussion of the *Social Trends* data, members of this community are more likely to be single parents than is the case in other ethnic groups. Thus, a growth in single parents attending church may be linked to the growth of these churches, as opposed to reflecting a trend in the general population.

Kristin Aune has highlighted how increasingly feminism is fragmenting. She argues that, increasingly, theorists are choosing to study specific groups of women rather than treat them as a homogeneous group. Moreover, there is no single description of women's experience which can be easily generalised. Describing how her own work concentrates on single women in the Evangelical sub-culture, she shows how the use

²²Brierley, P (ed), *Pulling Out of the Nosedive A Contemporary Picture of Churchgoing: what the 2005 English Church Census Reveals*, London, Christian Research, (2006), p. 3.

²³ Brierley, P, (ed), *UK Christian Handbook Religious Trends 5 2005/2006*, London, Christian Research, (2005), pp. 4 and 9 is the data which the reader of *Pulling Out of the Nosedive* is referred back to.

of congregational studies as an ethnographic tool is one way of studying these fragmented feminisms.²⁴

In her article *Singleness and Secularization: British Evangelical Women and Church (Dis)affiliation*, Aune cites personal communication with David Voas regarding his work on the *Church Life Profile Survey 2001 (CLP)*, which contains data from “nearly 100,000 adults in 2,000 English churches.” She says that “the data reveals that the majority of churchgoers are part of a couple. Almost all of these couples are married”. In the 35-64 age group (a category which at the lower end includes most of those with dependent children), Aune identifies that “86 percent of male churchgoers and 80 percent of female churchgoers have partners”, and uses this quantitative data as the basis of her argument that secularization is related to the changing nature of family and that, as the number of single women in society increases, secularisation through disaffiliation is likely to increase further, too. Her rationale for this is that because the church is based around meeting the needs of married couples, single women are seen as non-normative, and thus experience exclusion of various forms in Evangelical churches.

In this essay on secularisation, Aune refers to the changing nature of family and her focus is on co-habitation and the rise of singleness generally. She makes no reference to how many of the growing number of single people might have children. Her only specific use of the terms ‘single parent’, ‘single mother’, or ‘lone parent’ come when she is arguing that disaffiliation may be occurring for a wide range of reasons. She uses the example of “a single mother who had been at West Side only a short time, leaving to cohabit”. Aune recognises the differences between the various types of singles and the complexity of analysing the data, yet all single people, whatever the nature of their singleness, are in the end grouped together. This is problematic because, while Aune’s work is useful for highlighting that the church needs to take singleness seriously, it only allows for one way in which singleness might lead to increased secularisation.

Moreover, Aune completely fails to acknowledge that some single women are also mothers. When we are talking about single parents, we are discussing families with children. Therefore, a discussion of single people’s disaffiliation from church not only relates to the individual, but also to their children as well. If we use a definition of

²⁴Aune, K, *The Significance of Gender for Congregational Studies* within Guest, M et al, *Congregational Studies in the UK*, Aldershot, Ashgate, (2004), pp185-202. (P 188 specifically discusses *Post-modern Congregational Studies of Gender and Women*).

singleness that does not allow for those with dependents, we are required to move beyond the individual and talk about families instead. This is problematic, because one of the key areas identified by Aune and others regarding the exclusion of single women, as well as childless couples, is that discourses in the church tend to be framed around the inclusion of children. Many single people do not have children, as well as not having a partner, which means they lack a normative status. Again, this illustrates why single parents should be researched as a discreet category.²⁵

A variety of authors, including Voas and Crockett in the UK, and Hayes and Pittelkow in the Australian context, have used the CLP statistical survey data to look at the inter-generational transmission of religious belief and practice.²⁶ For Voas and Crockett, the data played a central role in their discussion of secularisation, in which they argued against the *Belief without Belonging* thesis, on the basis of levels of religious transmission between parents and their children. As one element of both studies involved looking at whether gender was a significant variable in any possible relationship between the belief of the parent and the child, they concentrated their research on married couples.

This illustrates how some theorists are already making decisions regarding single parents as a discreet category, by identifying who to exclude. Now, while such decisions can doubtless be justified methodologically, if groups such as single parents are not included in these studies, it leads to their exclusion and invisibility. This further reinforces the case that a body of literature looking at single parents as a discreet category in the sociology of religion needs to emerge, in order to see how their experiences compare to the wider population.

The CLP data related to members of five mainstream denominations, including the Church of England and the Baptist Union of Great Britain, which Warner identified as being the two largest groups of Evangelicals in the UK (based on membership of the Evangelical Alliance). As such, while the data does not relate exclusively to Evangelicals, it can be regarded as representative of them. In a currently unpublished article, Voas and Storm indicate that the marital status of the parent does make a difference as to whether their child will attend church as an adult. There is, they argue,

²⁵ See Aune, K, *Singleness and Secularization: British Evangelical Women and Church (Dis)affiliation* (pp 57-70), within Aune, K et al, *Women and Religion in the West*, , Aldershot, Ashgate, (2008).

²⁶ See Voas, D and Crockett, A, *Religion in Britain: Neither Believing nor Belonging* within *Sociology*, Vol 39: 11 (2005), p 11-27 and Hayes, B and Pittelkow, Y, Religious Belief, *Transmission, and the Family. An Australian Study*, within *Journal of Marriage and Family*, Vol 55:3, (1993), p755-766 for the examples cited.

a clear reduction in the likelihood of this happening if their parents had been divorced. One explanation they offer for this is that those who are most devout are least likely to divorce, and that such people are most likely putting greater efforts into transmitting their religious beliefs to their children.²⁷

In light of this, the experiences of single parents in churches become important. Can they, as has been suggested, be said to be less religious, or are there other factors which might make them less successful in the religious socialisation of their children? The question is then whether the lower likelihood of their children to attend church as adults results from them, or the children's experience of church? This latter question takes us beyond the scope of this research, but illustrates some of the questions that need to be asked in relation to single parent families and the church.

The above discussion illustrates how one area in the Sociology of Religion, namely the secularisation debate, could benefit from a body of work on single parents. While there is much debate regarding the beginning and process of secularisation and the form it has taken, there is general agreement that in the UK, secularisation has increased pace over the last quarter of a century or so. At the same time, the number of single parents in society has trebled so that, as we have previously seen, single parents now make up approximately one quarter of all households in the UK with dependent children. There is a need to identify whether the rise in single parents has contributed to secularisation, or if their under-representation is a result of more general causes of secularisation, including an increase in women's sexual freedom.

Callum Brown is a historian who has used a cultural analysis of social history to argue that secularisation began properly in Britain in the early 1960s. One of the key reasons he identified for this was a change in the way women viewed sex and sexuality, arguing that increased permissiveness led to a situation where women were freed from dominant norms and values linked to nineteenth-century ideas of piety and femininity. While single motherhood is not discussed by Brown, it offers a visible representation of the changes he identifies as causing secularisation.²⁸ However, one has to be careful; taking the above at face value may serve to reinforce the stereotype of single mothers as promiscuous women who have had children outside of permanent relationships, and

²⁷Voas, D and Storm, I, *The Inter-generational Transmission of Churchgoing in England and Australia*, Unpublished article, (2008).

²⁸ Brown, C, *The Death of Christian Britain*.

might lay responsibility for single parenthood almost exclusively on women. This is misleading, as the majority become single mothers through relationship breakdown.

Hugh McLeod, another social historian, has criticized Brown's work, and used oral history to illustrate that many women did not stop attending church because of a new sexual freedom, but rather because of marriage to non-attending men. McLeod does agree that there was a shift in attitudes towards sex, sexuality and family life generally during the mid-to-late 1960s, and argues that this led to an increase in divorce (and so in turn to single parenting), during the 1970s. He offers two explanations for this. Firstly, women were under less pressure to try and save a marriage if their partner committed adultery. Citing Cynthia White's (1970) content analysis of a *Women's Own* advice column, he shows how by 1970, the view was that decisions relating to sexuality and marriage were up to the individual, and there was no expectation as to what was the 'correct' outcome. Secondly, he argues that in the 1960s there was a move to "companionate marriages", with unrealistic expectations; therefore, the collapse of these relationships was common in the 1970s.²⁹

While both Brown and McLeod focus on changes which emerged during the 1960s, American feminist Rosemary Radford Ruether sees the rise in divorce and single parenthood in western countries as starting in the 1940s, acknowledging that there was an idealised view of the housewife that became normative during the 1950s, but arguing that this view is deceptive, as it concentrates primarily on middle-class women.³⁰ Furthermore, many people re-married quite quickly after divorce.

While Radford Ruether traces the beginning of the rise in divorce rates back to the war, and statistical increases in working women back to the late 1950s, like Brown and McLeod, she also recognises the role that the social changes in the 1960s played in changing perceptions of family life, focusing on the legislative changes of the late 1960s and early 1970s as crucial for reshaping what was considered the normative view. It was in fighting against the legislation on abortion and sexual discrimination that, as she argues, Evangelicals started to re-emphasise traditional morality and tried to reinforce a Victorian model of family. This is also picked up by Hunter and Stehlin, who argue that this reinforced view of the family was symbolic and romanticised.³¹

²⁹McLeod, H, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960'S*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, (2007).

³⁰ Radford Ruether, R, *Christianity and the Making of the Modern Family*, London, SCM Press, (2001).

³¹ Hunter, J and Stehlin, H, *Family: Toward Androgyny* within Davison Hunter, J, *Evangelicalism the Coming Generation*, London, University of Chicago Press, (1987), p. 78.

The above theorists all agree that, by the early 1970s, a change in society and in patterns of family had clearly started to occur. These changes coincide with a steep rise in secularisation in Western Europe, and to a lesser extent North America, and an increased politicisation in Evangelicalism. Thus, when looking at the experiences of single parents in Evangelical churches, the focus will be not on what caused the changes, but what the effects of them have been.

One area of congregational practice which has changed during this time period is the growth of small groups. This is something Robert Wuthnow has studied in depth. In his study of small groups in the United States, his central argument was that the movement was beginning to alter American society “both by changing our understandings of community and by redefining spirituality”. While different types of small group exist, Wuthnow expands his argument by explaining that these groups develop a kind of community which is clearly different from that which has traditionally flowed from family or ethnic ties. He puts forward the idea that in current society, “small groups may be functioning as surrogate sources of intimacy and primary identity”.³²

Representation and Experience

American post-feminist Penny Edgell conducted research in Christian and Jewish congregations in four residential communities in Upstate, New York. Her study examined how changing family forms and roles within the family (particularly linked to the rise in women being employed outside the home), in America since the 1970s had changed involvement in churches. She also looked at how churches were responding to these changes in wider society, and her study contained a mixture of telephone surveys, data from statistics, in-depth telephone interviews to gain individual data, a survey of pastors, official data, participant observation and focus groups to collect data on a congregational level³³.

While her sample contained data from a variety of religious congregations and theological positions, she was also, as a sub-theme, testing whether the “culture wars” distinction of differences between conservative and liberal churches could be supported. While some disagreement was present, particularly in relation to differing

³²See Wuthnow, R, *Sharing the Journey: Support Groups and America's New Quest for Community*, London, The Free Press, (1994), p2 and p11.

³³Edgell, P, *Religion and Family in A Changing Society*, Woodstock, Princeton University Press, (2006).

rhetoric, in practice, the picture was much more complex. She showed that there was a clear distinction to be made between the formal and informal aspects of church. This idea will be developed, in order to see whether one should make a similar distinction between the formal messages and the practices of conservative Evangelical churches in the UK context.

In her study, Edgell examined the experience of single parents as a discreet category, alongside dual-earner married couples, singles, blended families and co-habiting couples. Another significant theme, where she built on Penny Long Marler's work about the church programmes being based in the 1950s, was the effect of women's increased employment outside the home on the level of time involvement which people gave to congregations and the programmes offered by churches. She argued that many churches have programmes which reflect the reality of family life in the 1950s rather than that of today, but that these are starting to change in line with falling attendance and a consumer-led demand.³⁴

An exploration of this theme is useful for several reasons. Firstly, to identify whether the same type of church programming, which has placed women's activities in the daytime, and has been identified as problematic in the United States also exists in the UK. If it does, we need to look at why this model persists and how it may be problematic, as it may offer insight into how the family is seen in contemporary Evangelical churches. Secondly, focusing specifically on single parents, an examination of the conflicting demands on their time may provide insight into some of the practical reasons as to their under-representation in churches.

To understand the conflicting demands on working families, including single parents, a useful starting point is Hochschild's ethnographic study, which looked at employees in a major North American company.³⁵ The aim of the study was to explore the work-family balance, and how family-friendly policy impacted it, if at all. While it concentrated on the work and home lives of employees, it did not take into account any of the wider social activities in which they were involved. Consequently, while we can use it to identify the pressures working families might be under, it does not provide evidence regarding how this might shape their involvement in, and time given to, churches and other social organisations.

³⁴ Marler, P, *Lost in the Fifties. The Changing Family and the Nostalgic Church*, within Ammerman, N and Roof, WC, (ed), *Work, Family and Religion in Contemporary Society*, London, Routledge, (1994), p. 23-60.

³⁵ Hochschild, A, *The Time Bind When Work Becomes Home and Home Becomes Work*, New York, Metropolitan Books, (1997).

Hochschild's main findings were that employees are in a "time bind"; they work very long hours and want more quality time, but are doing very little in order to achieve this. The reasons for this are varied. For many lower class workers, on low incomes and often on insecure hourly paid contracts and working rotating shifts, their reasons for working increasingly long hours are often practical. However, within this category (where she indicates many working single mothers are likely to be found), another reason for working is to escape difficulties and responsibilities at home. Work became a place where emotional support and relaxation could be found. Amongst middle class workers, who are more likely to buy the services of others, she found that one of the reasons for not changing their working patterns was a certain feeling of ambivalence. This has, to some extent, been supported by feminists, who have encouraged women to break through the corporate glass ceiling. Some caution should be applied to Hochschild's findings; all her data, for example, was based on the experiences of workers in one company only.

With regard to our focus on women, particularly single mothers, this raises the question of whether the church is similarly used as an escape from the home situation by those who do attend. This theme of the church as a haven is something is picked up by Hargrove who, contrary to Hochschild argues that it is the older institutions of family and church which are seen as providing havens for people to escape from some of the pressures of modern life.³⁶ Hochschild's work also raises the question of whether the "time bind" is one of the practical reasons why single mothers are less likely to attend. Building on this study and the work of both Edgell and Marler in this way will further allow us to assess the relationship between single parents and secularisation.

The practical and emotional aspects of single parenting, which include the time issue discussed above, are explored by Edgell. Her research shows that during times of disruption, religion tends to take on a higher significance in people's lives, and that during divorce or separation, people are likely to be asking the types of questions about life that religion can address. Women are particularly prone to "seek out religious community". Divorce is identified as being the largest route into lone parenting, and the majority of single parents on both sides of the Atlantic are female. The question is, if Edgell's research is correct, and both family formation and times of disruption are likely to lead to higher levels of engagement with the church, particularly by women, why is there lower involvement amongst single parents?

³⁶ Hargrove, B, *The Church, The Family and The Modernization Process*, within D' Antonio and Aldous, J (ed), *Families and Religions. Conflict and Change in Modern Society*, London, Sage, (1983), pp. 21 – 45.

Edgell does not address this question in her research, but her work indicates some areas for further exploration. She notes that “the story of single parent’s religious involvement is complicated and different to other parents,”³⁷ and her sample of single parents showed a level of attendance which was similar to single people without children. However, their involvement in the church and associated activities was closer to that of married people. This illustrates, again, how single parents are hard to categorise. Sometimes, they have more in common with single people in churches, due to their marital status, yet on other occasions, they are most similar to married couples in churches, because of their parental responsibilities.

Another factor which may explain the level of participation among single parents who are divorced is the attitude of the ex-spouse towards their children going to church, as Edgell has identified. Tied in with this are access arrangements, which British researcher Heather Wraight mentions in her book on the experience of lay women in churches, which is part sociological study and part fictional narrative. This weekend custody element means Sunday then becomes a day, for those single parents who are relieved of childcare responsibilities, when they can to catch up on those tasks which cannot so easily be done with a child present.³⁸ To understand what effect these factors may have on church attendance, it will be relevant to identify how single parents spend their time when they do not have caring responsibilities.

It is important to recognise that these issues do not only affect frequency and likelihood of attendance among single parents; a separate set of issues, concerning the organisation of children and youth work in churches, and how it is set up to meet both the practical and emotional needs of children from single parent families, need to be addressed. The teaching materials used with children, and how churches facilitate semi-regular attendees, are both important. To get a full picture of the experience of single parent families in churches, we need to bridge the gap which seems to exist between studies looking at adults, and studies looking at their children. Edgell, for example, looks at family programming in churches, but only from the perspective of services provided to adults. How children experience church, however, will impact the likelihood of their parents attending and vice versa. If a child does not want to go to church, and is not of an age where they can be left at home unattended, then the single parent will not be able to attend either. Similarly, if a single parent does not want to attend church, then their child is unlikely to attend either.

³⁷Edgell, *Religion and Family in A Changing Society*, p. 55.

³⁸Wraight, H, *Eve’s Glue. The Role Women Play in Holding the Church Together*, Carlisle, Patternoster Lifestyle, (2001), p. 25.

Another reason suggested by Edgell and others for the fact that single parents and other singles may not want to attend church is that they have a feeling of not 'fitting in'. To understand this, it is necessary to look at both the representation of single parents in churches, and of other groups who might experience exclusion and apparent marginalisation, to ascertain whether there are any common links, particularly within Evangelical churches. This may shed light on why single parents have previously not been included as a topic for research.

The study *Single Women: Challenge to the Church* by Aune uses qualitative data to identify the attitudes and experiences of Evangelical, single, Christian women. While recognising the complexity of their stories and differences in experience, she argues that single women are marginalised in various ways in Evangelical churches due to a range of factors including: the churches' attitudes towards those who are not married; issues related to opposite sex and forming relationships; emotional issues about long-term singleness; feelings of loneliness; the part these issues played in the church; and, finally, practical issues related to life beyond the church.

Using questionnaire responses, she was able to look at both positive and negative aspects of attitudes and experiences, and so to highlight the variation and apparent contradictions. For example, there was variation in the opportunities to be involved in the ministry of the church.³⁹ Due to anonymising methods, there was no denominational analysis, and so no indication of what factors may have led to this variation in experience. This is relevant because of the specific restrictions made on the roles women, and particularly single women, are able to take in some Evangelical denominations. Variation in experience of pastoral support was also apparent. While Aune does not touch upon the differences that exist between single people with and without children, her exploration is still useful. We will seek to identify whether being a parent, as well as being single, makes any difference to this experience.

Returning momentarily to Edgell: she makes a distinction between the spoken messages, the 'rhetoric', and those given out through 'practice'; that is, via organisational structure and activities.⁴⁰ The relationship between these two forms of message is not always easy or consistent. However, pastors were aware of the changes in family life (including there being more couples where both parents/partners worked), and the need for activities to reflect the changes in family form and structure which were taking place. Evangelicals saw the changes which have occurred as

³⁹Aune, K, *Single Women: Challenge to the Church?*, Carlisle, Paternoster Press, (2003).

⁴⁰Edgell, *Religion and Family in A Changing Society* p. 94.

negative, and both they and their congregations were more likely to view the changing forms of family, including single parenting, in this way.

The sometimes contradictory, and often complex, nature of the relationship between spoken messages and activities is picked up by the ethnographer Brenda Brasher in her study of women in American fundamentalist congregations.⁴¹ It sought to understand why women chose to actively participate in fundamentalist Christian congregations, and involved participant observation, interviews, and focus groups with women from two Californian congregations. Brasher's study investigated fundamentalism, which, along with Bebbington, she makes clear is not the same as Evangelicalism.⁴² However, she highlighted the overlap and shared heritage of Christian fundamentalism and conservative Evangelicalism, thus making her findings useful.

The key finding of her research was that, while the dominant rhetoric in these churches and public practice appeared to be male-dominated and disempowering of women, they contained strong women's ministries. These less visible gender-based activities and groups had female leaders, and were based around meeting the varying needs of women. These ministries were reported as being places where many of the women in the sample felt they could temporarily find escape from the tensions and stresses in their everyday lives. Practical help was given, often by those with similar experiences.

One respondent spoke of a single parents' group, led by single parents.⁴³ This shows that conflicting representations exist, which, to some extent are dependent on each other. Women may be empowered by leading groups and offering counselling to others who are seen as being similar. However, that empowerment appears to come through seeing others as being in need of support. While Brasher makes clear that many of the leaders gain their status as a result of their being the wives of male leaders, she does not make clear how leaders of groups for single women are chosen. Therefore, it is not clear whether it is education, previous employment, class, or other factors which enable some women to be seen in a positive light and suitable for leadership, while others are seen as being in need of support.

Brasher's study supported the view that the majority of women in these churches were married, and this was portrayed as the ideal state. However, she found that a large number had experienced marital difficulties and separation or divorce in the past, and

⁴¹Brasher, B, *Godly Women, Fundamentalism & Female Power*, London, Rutgers University Press, (1998).

⁴² Bebbington, D, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain* p. 275.

⁴³ Brasher, B, *Godly Women* p. 63.

this had often been a relevant factor in their conversion experience. This is important because it highlights how, in Evangelical churches, there may be more personal experience of single parenthood involved than is at first apparent/conceived. The number of divorcees who have remarried within a congregation then becomes a significant variable, because it is a useful indicator of how much experience of single parenthood may be hidden. In a church where there are a high number of people in second or subsequent marriages, representations of single parents may differ to those in congregations where the majority of married people are with their original partner.

Brasher highlights that the experiences of church leaders may be particularly relevant to the way alternative forms of family are viewed; this indicates how different discourses in churches inform each other. She gives the illustration of how an unmarried mother brought her child to be dedicated, and how this was celebrated. In this case, the mother was differentiated from other mothers when the church was told she was a single mother and would need “special support”, but she was also publicly celebrated. The explanation given is the strong anti-abortion position taken by the church.

Evangelical biblical feminist Elaine Storkey describes single mothers as being examples of the ‘Suffering Woman’. In attempting to show how the ‘Christian Woman’ should differ from the dominant forms of womanhood in our society, she offers three portrayals: The ‘New Woman’ is caricatured as the well-educated young professional, and the ‘Angry Woman’ gives a veiled portrait of second-wave feminists, angry about their own treatment and that of others because of their gender. Thirdly, the ‘Suffering Woman’ is portrayed as a lower-class, less well-educated woman, who is being oppressed and suffering poverty. She specifically relates this stereotype to single mothers, saying that, “Mothers bringing up families on their own are predominantly in this group”.⁴⁴

This is an example of how perceptions of women by religious organisations may be linked to wider public understandings. Hargrove argues that women are more likely to be in contact with public agencies than men, because men are more successful economically⁴⁵. As economically successful middle-class women are also less likely to rely on the state in the same way, working class women become seen as ‘suffering’ or ‘victims’ through their interactions with these agencies. As single mothers are more

⁴⁴ See Storkey, E, *Contributions to Christian Feminism*, London, Christian Impact Ltd,(1995) for Storkey’s descriptions of “the Christian Woman”; for her comments which relate single mothers to her outline of the Suffering Woman see p. 90.

⁴⁵ Hargrove, *The Church, The Family and The Modernization Process* p. 43.

likely to be in receipt of social security benefits, this may be another reason why they are seen as being in need. Moreover, survivors of abuse fall into Storkey's category of Suffering Women.

The assumption underpinning the above which need to be explored further. The first is that economic situation and education are often linked. For a number of single mothers, whose route into single parenting is divorce, separation or widowhood, their new situation leads to a fall in their income and standard of living. If they did not have children, or were in a dual earner family, they may well fall into Storkey's category of New Woman. That is not to deny the reality that there are single mothers who may fit Storkey's stereotype, but it is to say that she has taken a reductionist approach, which fails to recognise or reflect the diversity of single motherhood.

In her exploration of reasons for tensions between churches and families, Joan Aldous explores why women may be seen as victims, arguing that members of the clergy with more traditional views may see women as victims of their own actions, due to their embrace of secularisation. Some clergy "may be ambivalent about ministering to the divorced, sexually unhappy, the pregnant single woman, the career-committed wife and other persons whose situations and perspectives may have been influenced by women's critique of the established social order".⁴⁶ Therefore, when we are examining representations of single mothers and others as victims, we need to identify how their 'victimhood' is being constructed by the person ascribing them that label.

A related representation of single parents is given by theologian Adrian Thatcher, who puts forward a view of the single mother as a kind of "super mum", who is achieving in the face of adversity. He says in his book *Theology and Families*, that the single mother with children "is doubly committed to her child or children, trying to be both mother and father to them, and placing them and their needs before her own. These are heroic examples of commitment, often requiring emotional, economic and physically exhausting self-sacrifice which ought to be honoured by churches, even as they are honoured by the father of all".⁴⁷ While this type of representation is more positive, it still presents us with problems. It continues to present the single parent as being 'different', and as somebody who is not living up to their full potential because of sacrifices they are making. Again, this may attract a certain type of support, rather than developing the single parent's potential.

⁴⁶ Aldous, J, *Problematic Elements in the Relationships Between Churches and Families*, within D' Antonio and Aldous, J (ed), *Families and Religions. Conflict and Change in Modern Society*, London, Sage, (1983), pp. 63-80.

⁴⁷ Thatcher, A, *Theology and Families*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, (2007), p. 136.

Conclusion

If single parents are proportionately under-represented in Evangelical congregations, a set of questions are raised. Does it dictate the way single parents are treated, as well as the opportunities to serve and to be served, in churches? Does 'single parent' become the 'master status' in terms of how they are perceived and treated by others?

If this is the case, and the individual becomes predominantly viewed through the lens of being a single parent, rather than in terms of any other feature, does this mean that their feelings of difference are heightened? Furthermore, what impact does this have on their attendance, and is it proportionately lower than we would expect because of the above-mentioned issues? This might relate to how the different routes into single parenthood are viewed. Having identified that single parents are also single, we need to explore how singleness is viewed in churches of different types. These questions are important because they not only influence the local church situation, but the wider Evangelical sub-culture, as well as influencing how these representations are formed. These issues will be explored in subsequent chapters.

Small Town Congregation Chapter

Introduction

The small town congregation is in a fairly affluent, yet if one looks at the town in which it is located, diverse area. The church itself nestles within an area made up of privately-owned semi-detached and detached houses, and yet within walking distance, there is an estate containing a large amount of social housing. This mix is reflected in the housing data available for its parliamentary constituency; 60.8% is owner-occupied, 35.1% is social housing, (which is a mix of council and housing association properties). A very small amount, 2.8%, is privately rented. The population of the area is almost exclusively white (99%) according to the 2001 census.⁴⁸ In 2001, there was an almost even split of people under 18 (22.4%) and over 60 (22.2%) within the area. This is around the national average. In 2008, 19% of the population were aged under sixteen; this has fallen steadily from 1971 and is around the same level of the national population who are of retirement age.⁴⁹

There are a small number of full-time students and, according to the census data, about 10% of the population are graduates, while just over a third (38.8%) are without any formal qualifications. The figure for those with degrees is much lower than the national average (19% lower) while the figure for those without formal qualifications is almost 20% above the national average.⁵⁰ Within the 2001 census, 84.2% of the population of the area described themselves as Christian. This was higher than the national average of 71.8%, but is not surprising bearing in mind this is not an ethnically mixed area.⁵¹ The parliamentary constituency in which it is located takes in a mixture of rural, small town and city areas. Before boundary changes, the constituency was named after the town.

The congregation is gathered from a wide area, with many people travelling several miles by car from neighbouring towns and cities to attend. This includes, but also went beyond, the area covered by the parliamentary constituency. Access to the prayer list rather than the membership list, was given and this contained the details of five

⁴⁸ <http://ukpollingreport.co.uk/guide/seat-profiles/houghtonandsunderlandsouth/?cp=all> (accessed 10/1/11).

⁴⁹ See Hughes, M, (ed), Social Trends 40 Full Report, London, Office for National Statistics (2010) , <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/statbase/product.asp?vlnk=13675>, (accessed 9/10/11) and <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/cci/nugget.asp?id=6> (accessed 22/2/11).

⁵⁰ The national averages are 29% for graduates and 12.4% for those with no qualifications. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/8311447.stm> (accessed 22/2/11).

⁵¹ <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/cci/nugget.asp?id=954> (accessed 22/2/11).

hundred and forty one people who are in contact with the church. The people on the list were spread across four different postcode towns, and various different districts within each of those.

Only 27% of those on the list lived within the same postcode district as the church. However, many of those were not known to the assistant to the small groups' pastor, who was helping identify the ages and marital status of those on the list. She said that part of the reason for this is that many of these people may be on the list for attending the old people's club or parent and toddler group, rather than the church. This may well be the case, as it was possible to gather much more data on many of those who travelled in from further afield. Based on observations in the church, as well as the data on the prayer list, the church is representative of the wider demographic mix of the area, in terms of the spread of ages and the ethnicity profile within the congregation. Including children the average congregational attendance on a Sunday morning is around four-hundred, which means it can be regarded as a large church.⁵²

The church was built and opened in 1997, replacing an earlier building which was opened in 1965, which was in turn a new building for an existing congregation. The construction of the 1965 building was facilitated by a wealthy businessman from the congregation.⁵³ The same family were involved in financing the most recent building, through the charitable foundation that they operate.⁵⁴ This family are one example of the "*Power Brokers*" one interviewee referred to as a group in the congregation, which others referred to as "*family networks*", "*established groups*", "*old established church families*" and "*well established members*".

This reflects the way that some people focused on the family relationships that exist within the congregation, particularly amongst those who have attended for some time, while others looked at the way that there is a group of people who are very much embedded in the congregation. The influence of this group was acknowledged more explicitly by some interviewees than others. The eldership of the congregation is comprised of these established members. The process for appointing the eldership is that the elders themselves bring nominations to the church meeting for acceptance once they have agreed upon them. These nominations are then usually ratified. However, the influence of the *established* group should not be over-emphasised, as the

⁵² According to Brierley, P, Pulling Out of the Nose Dive, p162 only 6% of congregations are larger than 300 on a Sunday.

⁵³ [the small town church website] [our history](#) (accessed 25/1/11).

⁵⁴ [*established family* charitable foundation website](accessed 25/1/11).

newcomer group were also heavily involved in the congregation and were particularly influential in small groups.

For the purposes of this chapter, we use the terms *established* and *newcomer* to distinguish between the two groups. The term *established* refers primarily to those people who have grown up within the congregation and so are second generation members, while *newcomer* relates to those who have come into the congregation within the last decade or so, without any previous contact with this church.

During my research, it was not possible to gain access to most of this *established* group in the same way as the *newcomer* members of the congregation. As an example of the operation of this divide, when asking the *established* women's small group whether it would be possible to observe their meetings, they were reluctant to allow this; their reason for this was that they were older and did not contain any single parents. When told that observing this group would still be useful for contextual research, and to compare their experience to that of the single parents, they were still unwilling to grant access. One reason that being able to observe the other small groups may have been easier is that access to those was negotiated by the small groups' pastor, who had a stronger oversight role over the groups which had been set up more recently, emerging out of *Alpha* or *Christianity Explored* courses.

Self-Identity

Looking at the church website, its values and purposes are identified as follows:

Values – commitment, accountability, inclusion, integrity, care, opportunity and service.

Purpose – discipleship, worship, community, ministry and evangelism.⁵⁵

There was an expectation in this congregation that the achievement of the 'purpose' would be measurable in quantitative terms, as seen by conversions, baptisms, the observable involvement of people in the congregation and by numerical growth. This part of the chapter explores the self-identity of the congregation and how it relates to these stated 'values' and 'purpose'.

During an initial conversation with the pastor, it was made clear that while the congregation had a reformed theology, it was Free Evangelical and so not denominationally aligned in any way. This assertion of denominational non-alignment

⁵⁵See [the small town church website] and specific pages relating to "values" and "purpose" (accessed 15/1/11).

was significant because this congregation has historical links back to the Brethren Church; it is one of the things that distinguished the experiences of the *established* and *newer* members. The more *established* members of the church are from families that had been part of the Brethren Church in its old building, while those who are newer to the church had mostly started attending since it had begun self-identifying as Free Evangelical and after the new building had opened.

While it was not possible to explore this with older members of the congregation, the impression of *newer* people was that there were some older people for whom this was an ongoing issue. One of the leadership team put it this way:

“Within [the congregation], you have a group that have grown up with [it] as a particular style of Plymouth Brethren church which it isn’t anymore, and like anything, losing your grip on what you’re familiar with, seeing it slip away as you get older, is more difficult for some than others.”

Another interviewee, who had been involved in leadership, noted of the *newcomer* members:

“You have people who have come in through church transfer from either other like-minded Brethren or Evangelical church affiliation. You have people who have come in from other churches, maybe on the more charismatic end of church life, and you’ll have people who come in from no church background whatsoever.”

This variation in attitudes between the two classifications of members suggests that understanding of the way in which the values might be expressed is something which may differ between subsections of the congregation. In this situation, *Evangelical* becomes an important word, because it is something around which those of varying traditions can unify. However, the variety of meanings and associated practices resulting from particular interpretations of this term have the potential to become areas of contention, leading to division and potential ‘silences’ for fear of division.⁵⁶ The latter can take the form of coming to a consensus of keeping silent on areas of difference in order to maintain unity. Alternatively, the silences may arise from those who feel they have less power finding themselves unwilling or unable to challenge the dominant discourses. The problem is further complicated because, as Leanne Van Dyk explains, there has been “an ecclesiological deficit” amongst Evangelicals. By this, she means

⁵⁶ One might see the following selection of articles in *The Guardian* from 2008, in which the nature of Evangelicalism was debated: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/belief/2008/dec/08/christianity-religion> (accessed 25/1/11) as well as academic texts such as Bebbington, D, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, Guest, M, *Evangelical Identity and Contemporary Culture* and Warner, R *Reinventing English Evangelicalism 1966 – 2001 for discussion of this debate.*

that there is a lack of theological understanding regarding what the church actually is and should look like.⁵⁷

As one leader explained, there is not any theological reflection about the nature of church. He said, “I think, generally, people are quite lazy in how they appropriate between going to church, how they differentiate actually between going to church, and theology.”

It is worth noting David Bebbington’s quadrilateral, from ‘*Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*’, in which he identifies four specific aspects of Evangelicalism: *conversionism*, *activism*, *Biblicism* and *crucicentrism*. These encompass an emphasis on conversion, sharing the gospel message with others, and thus on being actively involved in social action or charitable work, a focus on the bible as one’s ultimate authority and on being saved through what is regarded as the atoning sacrifice of Jesus upon the cross. These four characteristics are seen by most academics who have written on the subject over the last few years as comprising the ‘standard definition’ of an Evangelical.⁵⁸ Timothy Larsen adds to this the requirement of being “an orthodox Protestant who stands in the tradition of the global Christian networks arising from the eighteenth-century revival movements associated with John Wesley and George Whitfield”.⁵⁹

Through informal discussion, looking at promotional material from the congregation and from what was said in formal meetings, as well as interview data, there was a clear sense of being Evangelical and owning this term as a label. The two interviewees who found the church through an internet search had both included ‘Evangelical’ within their search term. Additionally, the church’s statement of faith on their website, entitled ‘*What we Believe*’, is quite detailed and very explicitly Evangelical.⁶⁰ With regards to their view of the bible, it says,

“We believe that God has revealed Himself in The Bible and continues to do so. We believe that the Bible, both Old and New Testament, as originally given through human

⁵⁷ Larsen and Treier, *The Cambridge Companion to Evangelical Theology*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press (2007), p132.

⁵⁸ Bebbington, D, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain* gave the definition which has now become accepted. For examples of discussions of this definition and acceptance of its dominance see a number of publications in the Paternoster series *Studies in Evangelical History and Thought*, (of which Bebbington is a series editor), Jamieson, *A Churchless Faith: Faith Journeys Beyond the Churches*, London, SPCK, (2002) and Pete Broadbent’s description within Atherstone, Broadbent, Warner, *Reinventing English Evangelicalism: Reviews and Response*, ANVIL, Vol 26, Nos 3&4, 2009 (p 205).

⁵⁹ Larsen and Treier, *The Cambridge Companion to Evangelical Theology*, p1.

⁶⁰ [the small town church website]/[statement-of-faith](#) (accessed 1/12/10)

authors, is the inspired Word of God without error. As such it remains for us our final authority, reliable, trustworthy and sufficient for all matters of Christian Life.”

There is a similarly definite statement regarding salvation:

“The salvation of sinners is solely by the sovereignty and grace of God and cannot be earned or deserved. God forgives sinners whom He calls, granting them repentance and faith. All who believe in Christ are justified by faith alone, and have eternal life. Salvation has been accomplished through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ which is the only and all-sufficient ground for our redemption from the guilt and power of sin and from its eternal consequences.”

It was clear there was a strong emphasis on conversion as the key purpose of the church. This was seen as something that could be measured in quantitative terms. One of the interviewees said that a problem their family had encountered in the church related to their son’s decision to get baptised:

“Because they expected everybody to have the clear... I was a tearaway and then I realised I was a sinner, so say the ‘sinner’s prayer’ and now I want to get baptised. Whereas [their son] was, actually I was brought up in a Christian home and... I’ve known about Jesus as long as I can remember.... But there seemed to be a real kind of uncomfot among some of the elders that this wasn’t the right kind of story.”

There was also a high level of emphasis on Biblicism and a view of the bible as being “the word of God”, although it was not clear whether the majority of the congregation saw it as inerrant or not.

One area in which the correct interpretation of scripture and appropriate Evangelical practice is debated and disputed within this congregation is the role that women should play in church life, particularly regarding leadership. This is something that may distinguish the *Traditional* and *Pragmatic* groups. This issue was so sensitive that one interviewee who commented upon it asked me to be very careful regarding my use of their comments (which were positive regarding the role women should play). During interviews, there was a clear division of opinion in the congregation on this issue, but without an obvious pattern in terms of age or gender. In this situation, the so-called *Power Brokers* become important, because they control the eldership. As explained, the addition of new members to the eldership is through nomination from, and agreement by, the eldership themselves, prior to affirmation from a whole church meeting.

The *Power Brokers* who comprise this group are in the position, therefore, of being able to ensure that elders are appointed who share their views. This enables them to control the dominant discourse in, and direction of, the church to some extent. The elders are the leadership committee who hold the pastors to account and steer the overall direction of the church. Their view is perceived as having greater authority, publicly, than alternative perspectives. They may also, through their role, be either explicitly or implicitly controlling the dominant discourse, because anything said publicly with which this group of elders disagree will be something for which the leader or speaker may be called to account.

The interview data showed that the issue of gender and leadership was something *newer* members of the church were divided upon. However, it was an issue that one of the interviewees linked to a perceived division between *established and newer* members, when he and his wife were asked if they thought a mixed leadership would be beneficial:

“But you do get the impression that there is the kind of older Brethren part of the church and the new kind of generation Christian, been through the Alpha course, they have quite a different set of concerns to the elders. So my impression is that the older Brethren side is kind of like, no it’s the male leadership, where as the younger ones are sort of why aren’t there any female elders or preachers or whatever?”

The sensitivity and importance of the issue of gender and leadership in Evangelical churches is a result of the importance placed upon the role of the bible. As Christian feminist Elaine Storkey explains, those who embrace biblicism as part of their identity are generally agreed as to the truthfulness of the bible.⁶¹ This “does not, however, safeguard against disagreements which arise when we look at the actual text. We might disagree about what we believe to be the intent of the author, or how it should be applied today.... we might disagree about whether the cultural context of the text should be reproduced today (e.g. patriarchy) or about what differentiates a ‘timeless truth’ from a ‘historical particular’ (male leadership)”.

So, is the sensitivity of the issue in this church linked to there being a consciously patriarchal, male leadership which feels it is being challenged?

From observations of, and discussions with, people the issue appears to be deeper still, bound up with the church’s ambiguous identity and the link back to the way things were done when it was a Brethren congregation. Thus, even if *newcomer* members do take the same biblical approach as those from the *established* families, there is a difference

⁶¹ Larsen and Treier (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Evangelical Theology*, p164-165.

in the significance of that understanding amongst them. For the *established* families, it relates to their identity as Brethren Christians, even if they are now technically Free Evangelicals. As somebody said in an informal conversation, he believed that rather than Free Evangelical, Progressive Brethren would be a better description of the church. Consequently, the interviewee previously mentioned was in some ways correct in his assessment of this being an issue that can be understood as a dividing feature between the *established* and *newcomer* parts of the church.

Divisions within the church, of which gender is one example, clearly existed. When this research began, the congregation had three pastors. One was a senior pastor, one was an associate pastor with responsibility for small groups, and one was an associate pastor with responsibility for family and children's work. The pastors have all left the church during the research period. The reasons for this are sketchy and, as previously mentioned, people were very reluctant, to the point of seeming a little scared, to talk to me about certain topics. The subject of staff turnover, like gender, is one of these topics. It was not possible to discover if there has been any link between the two issues.

What has been ascertained is that up until this point, there had been a more steady staffing situation. and thus three pastors leaving within six months or so of each other is an anomaly. Through interviews and informal conversations, it has emerged that up until the 1980s, the church did not employ a pastor. This is a standard practice within the Brethren church. The introduction of a paid senior leadership team occurred around the same time as the most recent building project and the move from being a Brethren Church to self-identifying as Free Evangelical.

As indicated earlier, the link back to a Brethren heritage is one reason why the leadership of this congregation, (pastors and elders), is exclusively male, although women are involved in running women's ministries and assisting with the running of some wider ministries, including some of the small groups. The majority of those running these women's ministries are the wives of male leaders. This, therefore, could potentially limit the role which single mothers could play in the leadership of women's ministries. The pattern of this type of leadership and gender role is reminiscent of gender relationships and responsibilities in the 1950s. Edgell explains that many of the current patterns of the church are rooted in "a traditional nuclear family schema that was widely institutionalised in the religious expansion of the 1950s."⁶² While her research was focused around the attitudes and practices in congregations more

⁶² Edgell, P, In *Rhetoric and Practice: Defining "Good Family" in Local Congregations* in Dillon, M, (ed), *Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press,(2003), p164.

generally and was based in North America, similar congregational studies in the UK by researchers such as Margaret Harris have come to similar conclusions.⁶³

However, a note of caution should be raised warning against automatically linking a patriarchal attitude with being an older member of an Evangelical congregation or viewing it as something which will always be negative. In recent research amongst Evangelicals conducted by Christian Research and the Evangelical Alliance, Green and Hewitt showed that while around 70% of Evangelicals agree to some extent that women should be able to be involved in all areas of church life and leadership (with 20% disagreeing to some extent and 10% being unsure), the figure supporting women's leadership is significantly lower amongst the 16-24 age group. Also, research by Brasher and others has indicated that in congregations where there is a patriarchal organisational structure women can use women only groups as spaces of empowerment.⁶⁴

Activism and biblicism seemed to be the areas that were most complicated for the congregation, both practically and intellectually, in developing their self-image and ethos. We have already looked at biblicism and the role this plays in the discussions in the congregation surrounding gender and leadership, and will now look at activism, where two apparently paradoxical positions have arisen.

This is a church which puts a lot of resources into attracting 'seekers', running both *Alpha* and *Christianity Explored* courses and inviting their friends and colleagues to events run by the church to encourage conversion. This approach which seeks to encourage newcomers to come to a clear decision regarding conversion can be seen indicative of the quantitative approach taken by this congregation.

Several interviewees commented on the way the success of these strategies has caused unease, because as the church had grown bigger, a sense of discomfort and fear had arisen. One interviewee, who had raised the subject, said, "Is that about feeling threatened and that if in the fullness of time people come in and become Christians is this church then going to change from what I recognise it to be and what I'm comfortable with it being? Is it going to take me out of my comfort zone?" Another interviewee who had been in the church some time and had been involved in running a small bible study for young mums commented, after being asked whether there was a stronger emphasis on family in previous times, "I think [the church] has struggled with

⁶³ Harris, M, *Organizing God's Work : challenges for churches and synagogues*, Basingstoke, McMillan, 1998.

⁶⁴ Green, P and Hewitt, B, *21st Century Evangelicals: A Snapshot of the beliefs and habits of Evangelical Christians in the UK*, London, Evangelical Alliance and Christian Research, <http://www.eauk.org/snapshot/read.cfm> (accessed 25/1/11).

becoming a big church and I think some of the older families probably look round and think, “how did this happen?” and “is this what we wanted?” and the fact everybody doesn’t know everybody else.” There is a feeling of diminishing familiarity with those around. For single parents, the size of the congregation was also something which caused concern for some; it could lead to increased feelings of loneliness.

Several interviewees raised a concern about the way that the stated values did not always match the practice in the congregation, particularly in relation to engaging with the surrounding community. They put this in different ways in response to various questions. One told the story of a member becoming disturbed when he found out those living in the vicinity were being given free tickets to a concert the church was hosting rather than having to pay for them. This was being seen as an outreach event and a way of saying thank you to the residents around the church building, but there was a discomfort expressed about this. This interviewee said there was a “siege mentality” amongst some. Others, as mentioned previously, spoke about the discomfort some older members appeared to have with the size the church had grown to, and others commented on the way that there was a lack of local people in the church. However, there were different views expressed on this last point, possibly emerging from varying understandings of ‘outreach’, and whether this had to be explicitly talking to people about the gospel or whether the toddlers’ and old peoples’ groups counted as well.

With regards to the toddlers’ group, one of the mothers interviewed indicated that, when her children were young, she set up a separate small group for ‘church mums’ because very few people from the congregation went to the toddler group. Again, this can be interpreted as being symptomatic of the way this group sometimes unconsciously separate themselves off from others locally and maintain their distinctiveness. Part of the church’s self-image and ethos involves separation and distinctiveness.

If this assessment is correct, then the experiences and public recognition of single parents in the congregation have to be seen within this wider picture and culture. Thus, while inclusion may be a publicly stated value, In reality this value is held with the caveat that it does not conflict with the dominant discourse in the church.

The Role of Small Groups

In this section, we explore the role of small groups in this congregation, particularly referencing the work of Robert Wuthnow. This does have certain problems surrounding it because Wuthnow has based his research in the USA and this study is seeking to apply it to the British context. While UK researchers such as have Stephen Hunt have researched the nature of *Alpha* course small groups and others have explored the role of small groups in cell churches, there is little comparable research to Wuthnow's within the UK context which is why I am going to be concentrating on Wuthnow's work despite the ethnocentric basis of it.⁶⁵

There are a range of small groups within the congregation, which can be split into various categories. On the one hand there are groups which meet in people's homes and are generally attended by *established* members of the congregation, and other small, long-running groups held within the church building which are dominated by these older members. On the other hand, some groups have emerged in recent times from *Alpha* and *Christianity Explored* courses, and mainly contain *newcomers* to the congregation. The latter of these, particularly, are focused on achieving the aim of conversion and success in terms which can be quantitatively measured.

Small groups, then, become a clearly observable way of distinguishing the *established* and *newcomer* members of the congregation and a way of observing if the purposes of the congregation are being achieved. This division between the different groups was something one member commented upon very negatively: "I think the small group structure is in a bit of a disarray anyway, to be honest with you, in terms of very established church groups and new groups, and there's a kind of division between them at the moment." However, this expression of frustration was one of the few encountered; generally, people were enthusiastic when small groups were discussed, and everybody spoken to was in, or had been part of, one group or another.

The leadership of this church has decided to run both *Alpha*, on a yearly basis, and *Christianity Explored* on an ongoing basis. This mix of courses is unusual, because congregations normally choose to concentrate on one alone, due to differing theological understandings of the gifts and working of the Holy Spirit. However, it does reflect the influences of para-church organisations and wider networking within Evangelicalism, in which this congregation engages. The mix of courses is also a way for the congregation to acknowledge the existence and contribution of more charismatic approaches, while being more conservative in its own theology. Moreover,

⁶⁵ Hunt, S, *The Alpha Course and It's Critics*, Penteco Studies, Vol 4, (2005).

both of these courses have a focus on, and clear ways of approaching, conversion and the bible and the accompanying literature for group leaders seeks to help them instigate conversions amongst group members, although this is always done in a way which looks to ensure that participants feel able to express any doubts they have.

While we will not focus on the differences between the two courses, they do have a clear significance to the study because of the way in which they operate as an entry point for many of the *newcomer* group, including some of the divorced people and single parents interviewed during this research. Their agenda also dictates what the main focus of the congregation is, and how successful experience is measured – through conversion.

From observations and interview data, it seems that the small groups which emerge from the *Alpha* and *Christianity Explored* courses do however also exhibit a form of emotional care. Two examples of this, drawn from one of the *Christianity Explored* groups observed, illustrate this. The first occurred when one member of the group came in talking about a terminally ill relative. Time was given to let her talk and share her feelings. Emotional care was then given through a mix of encouraging comments, prayer and ideas for things she could put in a card to the dying relative's family. The second example came about when a single parent with a toddler had a concern regarding a parenting issue which came up in discussion. The bible study was put to one side and the group engaged in a time of discussion, during which the women present shared their experiences and encouragement was given to the single mother. There were some suggestions given but these were put forward in a non-directive way. This approach of putting the bible to one side was not one encountered frequently in this congregation; rather if there was a problem, somebody was more likely to quote a bit of scripture they felt may act as an encouragement. One woman described how she came to be among the leaders of the group and expounded her philosophy of how the emotional support within that setting should work:

“And then [the small groups' pastor] came and said there might be a couple of people now that would need a daytime group...the two that started it off are both mums. I don't think there was any particular support for them as parents envisaged, except because I'm a mum myself we've got that in common. And I'm a great believer that actually there is no point studying a particular passage of the bible if the burning issue that you're struggling with at the moment is something else and something very practical. So I was always open to giving time to the broader issues, because I believe that's what God works through. He actually teaches us through the simple things in life. So you know I was certainly happy to be flexible.”

The existence of the two different courses, and the values already referred to, are evidence that on a public level, the church wishes to use small groups to express a tolerance of diversity and inclusion. In the *Christianity Explored* groups observed (one daytime and one evening), and the small groups which had grown out of previous courses, there was a clear emphasis on everybody being welcome and being able to ask any question and express any viewpoint.

While people were encouraged to question, it was clear that within both courses, a particular understanding of Christianity, relating to salvation through belief in a theology of atonement and a reliance on the bible, was being promoted. There was, it seemed, toleration for the individual, as long as they did not, ultimately, challenge the dominant discourse and the beliefs of other people.

They also sought, it appeared, to be aware of the needs of people and show cultural sensitivity. This was clearly expressed in the words of the small groups' pastor when interviewed. He said, "I hope ... what I'm starting is a greater cultural awareness of diversity, because that challenges us as Christians to say 'hang on a minute!' and I've got to care about my sister or brother here and English isn't their first language. Or they have a problem at home with babysitters, or they're going through a divorce, or they're going through a bereavement. And I think we've also got to recognise in church ... [that] there are big cultural issues between age groups and between somebody over 60 and someone under 40."

The small groups were, therefore, rooted in the *Pragmatic* form of Evangelicalism described by Webber and Labanow, which we discussed earlier.

Following on from this, the small group leader explained to me that the social activities and events he built into the course (which included an outing to Holy Island), were an intentional strategy. He described it in the following way: "They provide an opportunity to reach beyond the 'helping you find a page in the bible, answering a question [approach]', to helping you in a walk, helping you in transport, providing much more of what I'd call hands on practical care. But also, they help you in building relationship, so I always make sure there is a day away with space for coffee and food, and maybe a walk, and looking for people to capitalise on that opportunity... These are very intentional, deliberate aspects to what we're doing."

Within this, there seems to be the aim, as Wuthnow describes, to reunite spirituality with concepts of community.

In relation to the contribution of the group leaders and pastors, theirs is very much a guiding role, focused on implementing a strategy in order to be successful in

evangelism. While interaction between those within the groups is part of this strategy, there seemed to be a feeling that group leaders have the 'right answers', despite their protestations that they were simply voicing their own thoughts and beliefs. The bible was used in a self-referential way, and this was what leaders claimed their knowledge was based upon. In doing this they set themselves up, inadvertently or otherwise, as having superior knowledge to that not based on the bible.

The desire to implement this type of evangelistic strategy translated into the experiences of single parents. This included daytime groups which fitted around their work and childcare responsibilities, a discussion of their parenting issues at one point, and social opportunities being provided for them. Thus, the small groups appeared to be seen in a positive light.

In his study, Wuthnow points out that self-help groups differ from bible study groups, although over half of the bible study group members he surveyed described theirs as a support group.⁶⁶

There is also a group for single parents, which has been running for a number of years. It is different from the home-groups in terms of the content of its meetings, but is similar in that it takes places in a home, rather than on church premises. The group was started by a member of the congregation who was a single parent at the time, and is primarily made up of slightly older single parents who are divorced or who are now remarried. The person who started the group is an *established* member of the congregation, who has been attending the church since she was a child.

This is an example of the type of small group which Robert Wuthnow describes as "responding to some need in their own lives or in the lives of people they knew".⁶⁷ Single parents, by their very status, have experienced some kind of fragmentation of the traditional forms of community, and so groups aimed at them will definitely fall into the type which Wuthnow argues is growing in America. However, groups like this, by their very nature, raise an important question: should they be seen as small groups in the same way as other bible study groups, and do they meet the characteristics we associate with these? Alternatively, should they be regarded as self-help groups which happen to be part of a small group network within the church?

As this group, while having prayer during their meetings, focused primarily on a social and discussion-based approach, as opposed to one of formal bible study, it differed notably from other groups in the church and was in fact more akin to a self-help group,

⁶⁶Wuthnow, *Sharing the Journey*, p69.

⁶⁷ Wuthnow, *Sharing the Journey*, p2.

rather than a bible study. This is a useful distinction to make, in that it enables one to see how and why such groups differ from others, and may provide an explanation of a sense of being invisible felt by some group members, in relation to the wider congregation. This invisibility is a theme we will return to later.

The single parent group was unique in this congregation; in the other small groups, membership was largely based around geographical area or length of time spent in the church. For this group, membership had initially been based on being a single parent, although this had changed over time as the leader and other members had remarried, widening the membership to include couples.

There had been a group for mothers with young children which had previously existed, but this had disbanded. This group was the only other example of a long-term 'self-help' group whose existence came to my attention. A short parenting course, *Visionary Parenting*, may also be seen as an example of a 'self-help' group, but this was only designed to be a six week course and so did not properly qualify as a small group.

The former co-leader of the young mums' group described it in the following way:

"That was every Friday... that was basically ranging from just getting together for a chat and a cup of tea and the kids playing together around us, to occasionally having a bible study where I would try to arrange for a couple of ladies to come and help look after the children so we could concentrate. And we also did a parenting course and worked through that, the 'Care for the Family' one, Parent talk. So it was a real mixture of things and it would be very flexible depending on who turned up and how they were feeling."

The description of why it stopped was as follows:

"It was really because mums weren't coming that it stopped.... Obviously with the mums of young children thing it is a stage of life thing that you go through and people start to move out of that stage and as their kids start to get older they start to go back to work themselves. And it was a daytime group. We never looked at running one in the evening which I think potentially there could have been a market for. But, basically then you get a new set of mums and they don't necessarily know you personally, and they've not necessarily got kids at the same stage. And because it was quite a friendship-based thing initially, I would have been willing to carry it on if they'd have wanted to come but they didn't seem to want to come."

This description highlights some of the issues facing this type of 'self-help' group. Similar issues have been encountered by the single parent group.

The first of these issues is that of when to meet. The group leader has to select a time that will be convenient for members, and this involves making a judgment as to their likely employment situation. The mums' group met in the daytime, while the single parents' group meets in the evenings, reflecting differing expectations about their members' work hours. Employment, and particularly gaining part-time work which fitted around the children, was an important issue for the single parents, and this was something they frequently discussed and prayed about in the single parents' group. The leader of the single parent group was a woman who worked, whereas the leader of the mums' group did not work when her children were small. In her explanation of why the mums' group stopped, the co-leader acknowledged that there might have been a market for an evening group, but this was never explored. This reflects what might have been a dominant view in the church about women working, and could be an example of what Penny Long Marler calls a "nostalgic family image" existing within churches, which then tend to freeze their practices in the past.

The single parent group appear to differentiate themselves from other groups aimed at mums or women more generally, even down to details like their meeting time. They do not live in a nostalgic past, and nor do they have the luxury of avoiding "confronting the changing realities of the present", which is what the nostalgic model is temporarily buffering itself against, according to Marler.⁶⁸ Indeed, the very purpose of the single parents' group is to help its members negotiate these changing realities.

The second issue facing a self-help group which differentiates them from other types of gathering is the focus of their activities. For the other types of group in the congregation, the decision is clear: they will focus their activities around the bible and include a social aspect in some way alongside this - bible reading is always the dominant aspect. However, for self-help groups, there is more of a question to be addressed. The primary purpose of a self-help group is to address the more concrete needs of the members, although as Wuthnow explains, often it is the emotional, rather than practical or economic needs, which are met.⁶⁹ In this sort of group, giving space for its members to share experiences becomes important, and this was something which the members of the single parents' group highlighted as one of the most useful things about it.

A mum who had been part of the single parents' group after her divorce and initially described it as a "prayer group", went on to focus on the importance of the more secular aspects and in particular that of being able to share experiences together: "We

⁶⁸ See Marler, P, '*Lost in the Fifties The Changing Family and The Nostalgic Church*', within Ammerman and Roof (eds), '*Work, Family and Religion in Contemporary Society*', London, Routledge, (1995), pp23 - 60. The quotation is taken from p26.

⁶⁹ Wuthnow *Sharing the Journey*, p14.

could all talk, and because we were all lonely and didn't talk to many people about it, when we got together we just talked and talked ... We had real life problems we needed to discuss, and that was foremost in our minds and we needed that more than anything else."

A man who had become a single dad, and who was his child's primary carer following his separation and divorce, explained why this was important to him and how it fitted into the wider structure of the group's activities.

He said, "We wouldn't dip into scriptures, but we would talk about Jesus and what's happened within the week... difficulties and we'd have a prayer time at the end. But it was quite informal and relaxed ...I would really recommend it, especially for people who are in a hurting environment. Yeah and it was total, there was total trust there, everything was kept within the group. Nobody would talk about it outside. As I say, we would keep it private and confidential. It was good."

This is common with this type of group, according to Wuthnow: "small groups contribute to the relationship between the personal crises and faith development in two ways. They provide the setting in which people can be honest about their own crises, reflect on their pain, and face up to the questions with which they are struggling, rather than denying that life has its problems. They also bring people into contact with others who are experiencing crises or perhaps with others who can testify to the spiritual growth they have experienced as a result of crises."⁷⁰ We can see from the comments above, and description of the development of the group that follows, that this is exactly what the single parents' group is doing. The decision to fulfil these two purposes seems to be partially intentional but also partly instinctive on part of the leader, on the basis of her own experiences. It may also be that, as Wuthnow argues, the commonness of their experience gives the members the courage to face life.⁷¹

The third aspect relates to childcare. With the mums' group, they only had small children, but with the single parent group, the children were of a mix of ages. In both self-help groups, there was an expectation that the children would need to be part of the group because of the needs of their parents.

The leader of the single parent group explained how the demands of the single parents regarding childcare influenced where the group met and the form its meetings took.

⁷⁰ Wuthnow, *Sharing the Journey* p283.

⁷¹ Wuthnow *Sharing the Journey* p272.

“I thought, well, why don’t we just have it at home? It was easier and it meant the children could go in one room and watch TV and we could go and sit in the conservatory and sit and talk, and I thought of a lot of different ways of how to run the group. And one would be ‘let’s have a bible study’ or ‘let’s have a how do we cope’ kind of group and go through particular books, but the thing is the logistics of being a single parent, and you’ll know, sometimes you’re available and sometimes you’re not. You have no choice; you can’t be as available and if there’s no one at home and the child needs looking after and there’s only you can do that job. So what it actually metamorphosed into was, we all come in, we’d all have coffee and cake or biscuits or something, and we would all sit down and have a lovely chatter.”

In taking this approach, some of the problems which Wuthnow identified as existing are lessened or removed. These include: disagreements, shyness, time, feeling uncomfortable, pressure, feeling that one doesn’t fit in, expectations of the group and criticisms by the group.⁷² This approach also allows for the development of one-to-one relationships, for the person sharing their story to feel valued and for the listener to feel they are privileged because the story is being told to them. These are, again, all aspects of the small group which Wuthnow identifies.

Yet, the single parent group wasn’t without its problems. One of the members explained how her issues of shyness and feeling uncomfortable came out when it was time for the group to pray. She described how, “and when they start praying, I don’t like [it]. I know you’re recording my voice now, but I hate to hear my voice saying prayers when it’s deathly silent. I hate it, I just freeze. [The leader] knows it because as soon as she says prayers, I just sit there and I don’t say a word because that frightens the living daylights out of me. Even though I know it’s just a small group and nobody’s listening to me I just can’t speak. ...You know, even if I start praying it in my mind, I’ll start saying it in my mind and I’ll forget what I’m saying but everybody else just seems to manage brilliantly, and they know all the verses from the bible and stuff like that, and I don’t, and that makes me feel as though I want to withdraw as well.”

The fourth issue is the scope of the group’s activities. The parenting course referred to earlier within the quotation was organised by one of the mums’ group’s leaders in such a way as to be open to a wider audience than just the existing members. The single parents’ group had some ideas on how to possibly widen their activities, but these were not realised. One woman, who had been a member of the group for some years, explained: “There was talk of having trips out and stuff like that but it didn’t always happen, because in the summer holidays, not everybody was having the same time off

⁷² Wuthnow, *Sharing the Journey* p 194 -195.

and kids go off with their other parents and stuff like that. So, you know, it didn't quite come off as much as we'd hoped."

The final issue concerns how groups which are based around supporting people through a particular stage of their lives develop and evolve. With the mums' group, as the original members' lives changed, the group closed. However, as previously mentioned, with the single parents' group, it has evolved into a group for both single parents and some couples. This was something that the members of group seemed to accept while holding different views on the subject.

One member of the group felt that perhaps two different groups should have emerged. She describes the changes by saying, "People have come and gone. Quite a few [have] got married and left. Apart from [two couples]. It's not so much singles as singles and couples. So, it obviously has a different way of going about things now. But I suppose when you look at it... at least you've got people who have been through it and have come out the other end. But, I don't know, I think maybe it should be two different groups, the remarried and the still single."

There was implicit agreement from another former member. She had left the group after she remarried, because while she still had friends there and it had been important to her, she felt that it was no longer the group which was appropriate to her. This moving to different groups at different times, according to changes of life circumstances is quite natural according to Wuthnow, and was reflected to some extent in the group.⁷³

The leader acknowledges that change has occurred since she remarried, but looks at it from a different angle to the group members. She made no reference to the way her own remarriage has contributed to it now being more of a singles and couples group. Rather, she focused on the positive contribution she feels having a mixed gender leadership can give. She referred to the changes by saying, "when I met my husband and we got married, it obviously got changed a bit and it was easier for men to come then. I mean, we did have one or two men. But it's easier if there is a male and female because if the guys are really distressed about anything, the guys would talk to [my husband] and the girls would talk to me".

Thus, she saw her and her husband's key role as that of being trusted to act as confidants. Wuthnow indicates the importance of confidants to those within a small group.⁷⁴ The leader of the group had this status and it was valued by the members.

⁷³ Wuthnow, *Sharing the Journey* p 62.

⁷⁴ Wuthnow, *Sharing the Journey* p271.

She developed this role not just through interaction with group members at meetings, but also through giving pastoral support between meetings. One of the members described his experience of this:

“There was support there. [The leader] used to ring to see if I was ok because, obviously, I was on my own and I was really low in spirit and still getting over the breakdown of the marriage and obviously I have felt so lonely at home..... And I think....[she,] because of the way God’s used her, could see that, not just with me but with others.”

The leader acknowledged the presence of couples within the group nowadays by speaking of members who had brought their new partners along. She put, as with much of her interview, a positive spin on it by saying, “we’ve had a couple of marriages out of it, you know, they’ve brought who they’ve been going out with and they’ve come along and so there is life after divorce in the church and it’s lovely to see that.”

This change to the group was seen slightly more cynically by some in the congregation that were spoken to informally. Some did wonder out loud whether the purpose of the group was actually to help people find another partner. Perhaps this view is a sign of the misunderstandings which may have arisen because single parents are rarely, if ever, mentioned in the dominant discourse of the church.

While for some members of the single parents’ group, this was the only group that they were part of, many of them were also members of other small groups, particularly bible study groups which met at the church. Thus, again, either instinctively or through a more thought-out process, members were being encouraged to not only belong to a group focused around fellowship or caring, but also to participate in other small groups in other settings. This, according to Wuthnow, is an example of good practice.⁷⁵

As mentioned earlier, there was a feeling amongst some of the interviewees that the single parents’ group was suffering some level of invisibility in the wider congregation. This was expressed in a variety of ways, both by those who had been members of the group and by those who were part of the wider congregation.

Two people who had previously been involved in the group became quite animated when discussing this topic. Both were passionate about the group because of the way it had helped them.

One woman, who had remarried and left the group, commented: “The only sad thing about it [the single parents’ group] is, other than if you’re a single parent, it’s not talked

⁷⁵ Wuthnow, *Sharing the Journey* p364.

about very much. We had a weekend when it was a small group weekend and the guy bigged up small groups and what you can achieve in them and there was no mention at all of the single parents' group. And I did find that, well, why is that one being left out? Why is that one being kept silent? Why is nobody talking about that one it helped so many people?"

Another member of the group put it this way. "But it's never been mentioned in the bulletin, why? But it's helped me and I'm sure it's helped others as well."

Both of these people were adamant during discussions on this issue that the reason for the lack of visibility of the group lay firmly with the wider congregation and leadership. However, members of the wider congregation, who were not part of the group, wondered if its lack of visibility stemmed from the group itself, or certainly from the leader. One of the interviewees thought it was badly advertised. This related to wider issues of communication in the church, something that several interviewees commented upon.

What is apparent from this is that there is some clash between the qualitative approach taken by the single parents' group and the quantitative approach which is dominant in the congregation. The single parents' group was viewed as successful by those within it, but those outside did not view it in the same way because it was not resulting in the conversions or acts of service which were being used as the measures of success.

In the next part of this chapter, we argue that a more complicated mix of factors, relating to the division between the *established* and *newcomer* groups, in the congregation, and dominant attitudes to family life, as well as communication issues, was at work here.

Underlying Attitudes to Single Parents and the Small Group for Single Parents

Throughout the majority of the interviews, there was a feeling that the dominant discourse of the family in congregational worship was based around the 1950s 'ideal'. Penny Edgell refers to it in her congregational study as "the Ozzie and Harriet family". This view of family life was mentioned earlier in relation to the mums' group, and is based around what Edgell describes as "a middle-class, male-breadwinner

family schema".⁷⁶ While Edgell's work again was conducted in North America, this appeared to be the dominant type of relationship model among the *established* members of the congregation.

However, in this group, and even more so among the *newcomers*, other types of family units were present. The other family type, which clearly existed and appeared to be equally prominent, if not dominant, amongst many of those in their forties and fifties, was that of a reconstituted family resulting from divorce and remarriage. By the very nature of this category, its members often had, at some point, been single parents.

Edgell goes on to argue that churches that wish to view themselves as inclusive will seek to "make all feel welcome regardless of their family situation", yet may simultaneously "affirm the scriptural basis for the nuclear family with children and of male 'headship'". Finally, they will provide "ministry to support married couples, with a focus on men's responsibilities."⁷⁷ It is clear that while this church may not have a specific ministry to support married couples there is, implicitly, a focus on men's responsibilities. This is demonstrated through the structure of the church, the preaching on Sundays and small groups. The *Visionary Parenting* course was strongly focused around emphasising these responsibilities. The other parts of this dominant rhetoric have already been clearly identified through this chapter.

In the light of intersections with the discussions on gender and leadership, we can see that this rhetoric is dominant in the congregation. From the previous discussions, it may also be something which is looked upon differently by the *established* and *newcomer* groups within the church, yet the *established* rhetoric will likely be the dominant one.

It is not clear if this is one of the reasons why it appeared that, particularly in more recent times, *newcomers* were not directed to this group by the leadership. Indeed, one of the single parents, and one of the divorced people with grown-up children, were not aware of the group's existence. The *newcomer*, who was a member of the group, was introduced to it by its leader, and not by any of the church's leaders. This is significant because this man had been welcomed into the congregation and indeed another small group by leaders who were fully aware of both the existence of the single parents' group and his circumstances. Indeed, the *newcomers* who were not aware of the group had discussed their personal situations with at least one of the pastors.

⁷⁶ See Edgell, P, *Religion and Family in A Changing Society*, Woodstock, Princeton University Press, (2006), p118 for discussion of both the "Ozzie and Harriet" view of the family and the dominant "family schema".

⁷⁷ Edgell, P, *Religion and Family in A Changing Society*, pp99-100.

Another explanation for the lack of signposting by pastors towards the group may be that it is viewed as *established*. When discussing his 'strategy', the small groups' pastor made clear that it was not his policy to integrate *newcomers* into *established* groups. When questioned about this issue, one woman in the church explained, "I think there is a perception that some of the *established* groups are a bit idiosyncratic and therefore, if you put some of the new Christians into them, they would be dramatically turned off, or perhaps not get the best provision for them." This demonstrates that the leaders of the church made an intentional decision not to publicise the group. Thus, despite the comments of its leader to the contrary, the group was rendered largely invisible.

The above analysis does highlight the difficulty, therefore, in separating the church's attitude to single parents from that of its views toward *established* small groups. Moreover, this presents difficulties in being sure as to the origin of the invisibility experienced by single parents, as several conflicting factors appear to be at work.

We may, however, discern something of the underlying attitudes in the wider congregation toward single parents by looking at how others described them in their interviews, and indeed how some stereotyped them. For example, the former small groups pastor admitted how his perceptions had changed as a result of talking with me about my research:

"I go away and think there is the widow, there is the divorcee, there is the male, there is also what might decide to term as the stereotypical which is the unmarried girl that's just gone and got pregnant."

This appeared to be typical of the view within the church, with people automatically thinking of the single parent in terms of a 'feckless' young woman, rather than somebody older who may be divorced. They were, therefore, making similar distinctions in their thinking to those made by Charles Murray in *The Emerging British Underclass*. Murray focuses on illegitimacy, because he regards it as "less ambiguous than other forms of single parenthood." As he goes on to explain, these types of single parent are more commonly identified among the lower social classes, and particularly the "underclass"⁷⁸. Thus, in holding on to this stereotype, the congregation are able to distance themselves from single parents, viewing them as the "other". If we accept Marler's view that holding on to a nostalgic worldview provides a buffer to cushion people from having to confront the realities of the present, as discussed earlier, then one can see how holding onto this stereotype becomes part of the buffering process.

⁷⁸ See Murray, C, *The Emerging British Underclass*, in Murray, C et al, *Charles Murray and the Underclass: The Developing Debate*, London, IEA Health and Welfare Unit with The Sunday Times, (1996) and for specific discussion of the underclass referred to pp 28-29.

Murray is the key theorist associated with the political 'New Right', and Melanie Phillips is the journalist who is most commonly associated with promoting this ideology in the press. She was quoted in relation to the decline of family life in one of the sermons heard in the church. This may indicate that media stereotypes of single parents also play a role in informing the underlying views of the congregation towards them, both on a public and a private level. However, it may also have a connection to the history and development of Evangelicalism in the United Kingdom over the last forty years. In turn, this draws us back to the links this church has to a wide range of para-church groups, whose ideas feed into the thinking of the congregation.

In her discussion on *Masculinity and Contemporary Evangelical Identity*, Kirsten Aune tells of how the London Festivals of Light in the early 1970s were closely linked to the emergence of the "New Right".⁷⁹ These festivals were, she explains, primarily attended by members of the new house church movement. Thus, they were associated with the strands of Evangelicalism which were not linked to particular denominations. As the church identifies itself as a Free Evangelical, and contains some members who have come in from a non-Brethren background, this is one possible strand of influence which has helped form the underlying attitudes of the congregation towards single parents.⁸⁰ While her evidence is primarily focused around her studies of the New Frontiers group of churches, this congregation, and individuals within, it have been influenced by this aspect of Evangelical history.⁸¹

We now move on to detailing the influence of para-church groups on this congregation, and within this, we discuss further how these groups feed into the underlying attitudes and experiences of single parents in the church.

The influence of Para-Church Groups

As previously described, this congregation has a mix of people within it; the *established* members from a Brethren background, *newcomers* from both non-charismatic and charismatic backgrounds, the de-churched and the unchurched. Among the English *newcomers* who were churched, their backgrounds seemed to be primarily Baptist or non-aligned Evangelical. Thus, we can already see before looking at the influence of para-church organisations there were a variety of denominational backgrounds being

⁷⁹Aune, K, *Making Men Men: Masculinity and Contemporary Evangelical Identity* in Smith, M, (ed), *British Evangelical Identities Past and Present Volume 1*, Milton Keynes, Paternoster, (2008), p159.

⁸¹ For a detailed explanation about the links between different groupings within Evangelicalism and further reading on the role of the Festival of Light see Warner, R, *Reinventing English Evangelicalism*.

blended together. These all tended to be from a free-church, conservative Evangelical direction, though.

We have previously made brief mention of the charitable foundation which one of the *established* families runs. This is one way in which links with para-church organisations are made. The family in question are part of the church eldership and their influence extends far beyond the local church. They have supported a range of projects in the UK and beyond, including one of the Evangelical bible colleges which sent a student to the church on placement for six weeks during the research period. One of the other Evangelical bible colleges also sent a team of mainly international students to the church for one week each year. The discussion of the influence of the para-church groups has to be seen within this context. The family in question are a good example of the entrepreneurial pragmatists that Rob Warner talks of in his book *Reinventing English Evangelicalism*, yet they also retain a conservative identity which is somewhat unusual among this group, according to Warner.⁸² One example of how this entrepreneurialism becomes evident in the wider congregation is through the promotion of different evangelistic opportunities, such as becoming involved in a monthly cafe church event at a coffee shop in a nearby city.

The location of the church and its modern facilities also need to be taken into account. The church is located in the middle of the North East between a number of major towns and cities. It is also within a few minutes of the major road routes through the region. As such, it is used as a regional conference venue by a range of organisations. Over the last decade these have included a range of para-church organisations. Thus, the maintaining of links with a wide range of para-church groups relates to incoming revenue, as well as using them as a resource provider.

Additionally, because of the role of the *established* family mentioned earlier, there is also a more complex dynamic involved for the para-church organisations than the simple resource provider one. The para-church groups will recognise this family and their role as both speakers and financial benefactors as one to be cultivated.

In regards to their relationship with para-church groups, the role of this congregation is then unusual, particularly within its regional setting. Certainly during the research period, there were a number of international speakers who came and spoke to this congregation at one event or another.

As we have already mentioned, the church regularly runs *Alpha*. This course, as with the *Christianity Explored* course, comes from a para-church organisation. This para-

⁸² Warner, *Reinventing English Evangelicalism*, p20 & p25.

church organisation runs leadership conferences and the organisation has both used the church building in the past for these and had one of the *established* family as one of the main family for their national leadership conference.⁸³ This course is aimed at non-Christians and is one of the way *newcomers* have entered the congregation.⁸⁴

Another para-church organisation which has influenced the church in the past is Willow Creek. The church is affiliated to Willow Creek UK and Ireland. The organisation puts together a Global Leaders Summit each year, in which members of the church participate. While there was debate amongst the leaders regarding the influence of Willow Creek, it could be seen within the attitude towards being a 'seeker-friendly' church and in the approach to small groups.⁸⁵

The final group to mention is the Evangelical Alliance (EA). This is the main English body which is seen to represent Evangelicals in the UK. In order to join the EA, the church has to agree to sign up to EA's statement of faith.⁸⁶

In addition to these links to the whole congregation, individuals also have a range of personal links on which to draw. An example of this would be the links to UCCF of which one of the interviewees spoke.

As explained previously, though, these para-church organisations are primarily seen as resource providers. One of the groups which has supplied resources and help in the past has been *Care for the Family*. This organisation is based in Cardiff and provided a parenting course that the group for young mums mentioned earlier.

One of the resource providers that the single parent group used was Clasp, which has since been taken over by Care for the Family. The leader of the single parents' group met the national leader of Clasp at a holiday for single parents and their children at one of the Evangelical bible colleges previously mentioned. This holiday was something somebody else in the church was aware of and encouraged the leader of the group to go on (prior to the starting of the group). It was through listening to Christine Tufnell and networking with her that the single parents' group was set up.

⁸³ <http://www.htb.org.uk/leadership-conference/interview-panel> (accessed 22/2/11).

⁸⁴ For a discussion on the discussion of Alpha and the effectiveness/ influence see work of Stephen Hunt for example: Hunt, S *The Alpha Course and It's Critics*, Penteco Studies, Vol 4, (2005).

⁸⁵ For further reading on the Willow Creek approach to small groups, and the history of Willow Creek see Donohoe, *Building a Church of Small Groups*, Grand Rapids, Zondervan, (2001).

⁸⁶ <http://www.eauk.org/about/basis-of-faith.cfm> (accessed 22/2/11).

The former set of para-church organisations referred to up to and including UCCF can all be seen as organisations which have the aim of i) promoting Evangelical practice through mission of some kind and ii) strengthening Evangelical practice. In addition, in different ways, each of the former groups also seeks to maintain a clear Evangelical theology and voice within society. Part of the way they tend to do this is through promoting a doctrinal code which includes an emphasis on the bible being taken as a divinely inspired “supreme authority” on matters of conduct.⁸⁷ This means that they are also likely to take the less ambiguous approach which focuses on single parents referring to “unmarried mothers”, although none of these organisations has materials specifically relating to this issue. Rather, the only message they tend to put forward which relates to the subject tends to be that sex should only be within marriage, and marriages should be regarded as monogamous relationships intended for life.

Care for the Family and Clasp may also be seeking to do this, but their focus is much more on providing support and help. The divisions we saw in relation to the nature of small groups are then also replicated within the para-church organisations which act as resource providers for them. Thus, those groups which are working most closely with single parents (such as Clasp and Care for the Family) are more likely to recognise the diverse routes into single parenthood and range of ages this occurs at. However, because of their supporting nature they are less likely to have a public voice; rather, their message is heard by those like the single parents in this congregation who are already aware of the difference between the myth of the single parent and the reality.

Conclusion

Having looked at the self-identity and ethos of the small town congregation, the role of small groups within it, the underlying view of single parents, the small group for single parents and the influence of para-church groups, we draw several conclusions regarding the experience of single parents in this church.

Firstly, the experience of single parents cannot be viewed in isolation. It has to be seen within the wider context of the division between *established* and *newcomer* groups in the church. Due to the leader of the single parent group being an *established* member, there is actually better discreet provision for single parents amongst the *established* group. This is surprising, because the *established* group are the more traditional group who are more rooted in a view of the world and church which comes from a Brethren

⁸⁷ The statements of faith of various of these organisations including Moorlands, Evangelical Alliance and UCCF all take this view of scripture.

background, was established in the 1950s, and is more exclusive on the grounds of gender and so forth.

This, therefore, shows how having a single parent in an *established* group who chooses to use their own experience to help others can have a positive impact.

However, when that *established* group becomes perceived as a threat or as unsuitable to feed new Christians into, then that resource can become invisible to *newcomers* who may benefit from it. In this situation, it is the pastors and leaders of the congregation who act as the gatekeepers, signposting people to the group or keeping it hidden from the *newcomer*. The key concern of the gatekeepers was the experience of 'church' a new member of the congregation was going to get, and misunderstandings regarding the purpose and benefits of the single parents' group caused the gatekeepers to choose not to signpost *newcomers* into the group.

Following on from this the role and purpose of small groups in the church is central. These small groups differ in form, but those which take a self-help format are very much in the minority. The experience of the single parent in the group and its evolution will depend very much upon the philosophy and life experience of the leader. These groups are spaces which are intended to be inclusive, but which may put forward exclusive ideologies.

Para-church groups may also have a role in promoting particular ideologies and views of single parents, which become stereotypes in the minds of non-single parent members of the congregation. Because the 'young, unmarried mother' is an unambiguous category which can more easily be 'othered', this was the dominant view of single parents in the congregation. Yet, the majority of single parents were older and had become single parents through divorce. Thus, it seems that the single parents in the congregation are not viewed through this part of their identity.

City Centre Congregation Chapter

Introduction

The city centre congregation is based in a socially deprived area. The church itself nestles within the shadow of high rise flats and is surrounded by a large amount of social housing. There are also a number of terraced houses in the area and many of these are privately rented, often by students. It is on the border between two council wards⁸⁸. In the council ward in which it is located, according to the 2001 census, 6.6% of the population were single parent families; the figure was similar for the neighbouring ward, and this compared with 7.1% in the city overall.⁸⁹ This indicates that, while the city as a whole is in line with the national figures, the ward has a slightly below average level of single parents, despite containing a much higher than average proportion of single people.⁹⁰

The Mosaic data, produced in February 2010, is the most recent and reliable data published by the local council.⁹¹ This data indicates that the area is split between students, close-knit communities and people living in social housing with uncertain employment prospects. The latter group comprise over 50% of the neighbouring ward.

The area has a multi-cultural population, and this is reflected both in the data regarding the vicinity of, and the businesses in, the locality of the church.⁹² It is also something which has influenced some of the church's activities in recent years, such as the provision of English classes, and a weekly session for asylum seekers. A Leeds University study into 'Ethnic Minority Women and Access to the Labour Market' in the city found that majority of its ethnic minority population is located within the same side of the city as the church. From both the report and observations of those asylum seekers in the congregation, the majority are young, single and male, and yet they are "a highly diverse group, with varied educational levels, employment experiences, aspirations, health, abilities, family arrangements and training and support needs."⁹³

⁸⁸ www.newcastle.gov.uk/wwwfileroot/regen/ldf/06.02.00_A3w... (accessed 5/5/11).

⁸⁹ <http://www.newcastle.gov.uk/core.nsf/a/info> [ward the church is located in] (accessed 14/3/11) .

⁹⁰ Hughes, M (ed), *Social Trends 40*, Newport, Office for National Statistics, (2010) (accessed via <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/StatBase/Product.asp?vlnk=13675>, 14/3/11).

⁹¹ <http://www.newcastle.gov.uk/core.nsf/a/mosaic> (accessed 13/3/11).

⁹² In 2001, 12.7% of the ward came from a minority ethnic group, compared to 6.9% in the city overall <http://www.newcastle.gov.uk/core.nsf/a/info> [ward the church is located in] (accessed 14/3/11) .

⁹³ See Stiell, B and Tang, N, *Ethnic Minority and Women and Access to the Labour Market in Newcastle*, HMSO,(2006) <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/sociology/research/circle/doc> (accessed 17/4/11). For the description of the diversity of the asylum seekers in the area see p 2.

Moreover, the presence of a large ethnic minority group in both the locality and the congregation is not only related to the growth in the numbers of asylum seekers in recent years. The church is located close to one of the city's hospitals, and there are a number of medical professionals within the congregation.

One of the council wards whose boundary connects with the one containing the church (and which is close to it) has an above national average ethnic minority population, with the predominant group being Bangladeshi. The majority of asylum seekers within the region come from Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, central African countries and the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.⁹⁴ The largest representation comes from the central African countries, particularly the French-speaking areas, but the church is in contact with, and has members from, the whole variety of ethnic groups. However, it is worth noting that while the area described above is diverse, the city has a smaller than average non-White population, compared to the national average.⁹⁵

That the church lies within a deprived, as well as an ethnically diverse, area is evidenced not only by the relevant official statistics, but also by the regular presence of a community feeding programme in the area around the church on a Sunday morning.⁹⁶ This is aimed at homeless people, but is also accessed by many living in temporary accommodation or who are living in real poverty. The area is within easy walking distance of the city centre, and all the amenities that provides. The high level of car ownership among the congregation was therefore somewhat incongruous when compared to the situation in the locality.

The area has changed significantly over the last century. Now in her sixties, one lady had been a church member for most of her life, and she described the way the locality had evolved over the years. "When I was young, we had very nice homes round about here, because this was quite a nice [area], and over the road were some very big houses - you know, Victorian, Edwardian houses that people, quite well to do people, had at one stage."

She commented that there had been: "a big change in the ethnic mix, particularly in the locality. There's been a big change... in the economic setup, not just amongst poor people. But the people who come with no resources, the unemployed, as well as there are a selection of people who are workshy and trouble makers in the area now, and I

⁹⁴Stiell, B and Tang, N, *Ethnic Minority and Women and Access to the Labour Market in Newcastle* ,p 9.

⁹⁵Stiell, B and Tang, N, *Ethnic Minority and Women and Access to the Labour Market in Newcastle*, p 12.

⁹⁶ <http://www.newcastle.gov.uk/core.nsf/a/mosaic> (accessed 21/6/10).

don't know that we've always had those. And there's been an influx of students as well which has made a difference as well."

For the purposes of this chapter, the terms *established* and *newcomer* will be used to distinguish between two groups in the congregation. The term *established* refers primarily to those people who have grown up within the church, and so are second-generation members. *Newcomer* relates to those who have come into the congregation in the last decade or so, without any previous contact with the church.

Another key term used in reference to this congregation is *community*, meaning those in the locality who are not students, and generally not highly educated, although one couple interviewed indicated that this situation was changing. The same couple, who had been part of the church for almost fifty years, indicated that the term *community* was one which was used locally by those outside the church, as well as within it. Moreover, it is a phrase they remember always being used, as opposed to being an intentional one chosen by the church to refer to local people. Their views, and the boundaries they informally said applied during a car journey, are not uniformly accepted throughout the church; the term itself appears to be contentious.

When asked for clarification, the church administrator said: "The term *community* really covers the whole congregation, which extends a distance from the local area; from the coast in the east to [an area outside of the city] on the west. [The assistant pastor] and others often use the term to refer to those who live in the streets around the church, but this is a moveable boundary". The assistant pastor herself, and others, had used it in a specific sense both within interviews and informally, but when asked for her definition, she said it was a point of much discussion. She had come to the conclusion that they are a gathered church, and so it referred to wherever people are connected to the church. However, it was used within a specific way in interviews, and so when the term is used in italics, it refers to those living around the church.

A Changing Church and Congregation

During the research, the church celebrated its one hundred and twenty-fifth anniversary; this was being marked throughout the year in a range of ways, including special services, meals and a pilgrimage walk around the city. The church website was redesigned towards the end of the research period, and included a page which referred to the anniversary. It said, "Given the legacy bequeathed us, we have tried to match our celebration with a fresh vision for a new legacy."⁹⁷ While the church itself is only

⁹⁷ [City Centre Church Website] (accessed 17/4/11).

one hundred and twenty-five years old, there is an acknowledgement in the history of the church, part of which is published on the website, that this “legacy bequeathed” can be traced back to 1650, when Parliamentary troops were garrisoned in the town, and to Thomas Gower, the first Baptist Minister in the city.⁹⁸ This history was updated for the church anniversary, and was useful in helping to trace the development of the work with families – including single parent families - that had been established in the area.

One of the church leaders, who had been part of the congregation for over twenty years – for a large part of that time as a lay person – gave her perspective on the changes that had occurred:

“I remember when we first came here. I mean, physically, the building has changed, but it’s also changed in it’s people who come. It’s a very culturally diverse place now, whereas before it wasn’t.but it is a very different place, and also I am happy to say we have the people from the community... I thought church was what we do on a Sunday... now because our building is open everyday of the week, church happens on a Monday and a Tuesday and a Wednesday, and it’s not just house groups, it’s here in the building that we would call church.”

From reading the church history and through interviews and informal conversations, it was clear that this change in culture was linked, in part, to the leadership of the church, particularly the ministry of the existing minister and his predecessor. The previous minister, who had come to preach for the 125th church anniversary, explained that prior to his appointment in 1982, the church had not been Evangelical in approach. He emphasised that it was not liberal previously, but had been more radical than Evangelical in theology.

The church’s one hundredth anniversary, in 1986, appears to have been a watershed year. For that anniversary, a team from another Baptist Church came and led a “Renewal’ Weekend, held in March.” The church history describes this as a “very powerful ministry, and people were stirred up in a variety of ways. The good effects of that weekend are still to be seen in the Church today.” This was also the year that the church welcomed a student on placement for the first time, and saw the establishment of the ‘Parent and Toddler Group’. The church history describes this group as being one “which maintains contact with families in the community.”⁹⁹

⁹⁸ Batten, D, et al, *Some Jesus People*, The City Centre Church, (1986), [City Centre Church Website] (accessed 20/4/11).

⁹⁹ See Lidgate, B, et al, *Living Stones*, [City Centre Church], (2011), p38 for all of the information regarding the church history relating to 1986.

Additionally, during one interview, a visit to a John Wimber event in 1986 was named as significant in moving the church to a position which was described as “guarded charismatic” (a term which probably best describes the approach to worship within the current congregation). This worship takes the form of some members of the congregation raising their hands in praise during worship songs, a belief in the healing power of Christ through prayer, having a prayer ministry team who are often available to pray with people after the service and the verbal affirmation of the prayers of others, which is sometimes heard during services.¹⁰⁰

The church history emphasises how, from 1988, it began to further embrace the wider Evangelical sub-culture and changes involving para-church groups and partners. This movement included joining the Evangelical Alliance in this year.¹⁰¹ It is around this time, which was also the period of the ‘Action in Mission’ initiative launched by the Baptist Union of Great Britain, that the congregation is recorded as having a desire to have a more visible presence amongst the *community*. In 1990, this involved recruiting a second full-time worker. This worker was involved in starting a number of initiatives, including a club for local youngsters. While this club closed, the original leader led another group, which opened in 2005, and has continued to develop. This is seen as a tool through which to “reach children in the local community”, according to the history.

This approach, of working with the *community*, and in partnership with other organisations, led in 1994 to a proposal being made to the church that they work toward establishing a ‘Family Care Centre’, in partnership with Spurgeon’s Child Care. This is a Christian organisation, involved in supporting families in difficult circumstances. This illustrates how, from the early 1990s onwards, there has been a desire within the church to help and work with a range of families in the local area, including single parent families. This desire, to connect with families in the *community*, also led to initiatives such as an annual street party, held between 2004 and 2009, when a local street would be closed off for the church to host a *community* event, with bouncy castles and so forth.

The original proposal for the ‘Family Centre’ was made in the mid 1990s, yet it took until 2002 for this to become a reality. The tension regarding the relationship between this project and the wider church is one which the church history acknowledges:

¹⁰⁰ Wimber, J, with Springer, K, *Power Evangelism Signs and Wonders Today*, London, Hodder and Stoughton, (1985) is a book which was published by John Wimber around the time of his 1986 tour of the UK and outlines his teaching.

¹⁰¹ The 1980s was a time of growth for the EA, and Rob Warner explores the reasons for this in *Reinventing English Evangelicalism, 1966-2001*, Milton Keynes, Paternoster, (2007).

“The launch.... caused confusion in the minds of a number of people as to which events were [family centre] projects and which were Church activities. Over a period of time, however, it was gradually accepted that, in essence the [family centre] and the Church were one and the same thing.”¹⁰²

While the church history suggests the resolution of this tension, particularly after the appointment of a new pastoral care worker in 2003 (the current assistant minister), some of the interviews, and particularly observations of what was said in some services and meetings, indicated that these tensions may have persisted. All of the *established* members spoken to recognised that the changes in the ethos and approach of the church described above had presented challenges for the congregation. On one level, the challenges are practical. In the church’s annual report, the administrator comments on the website and says, “Communication within any organisation is a challenge and particularly so in one which has so many people for whom English is not their first language.” On another level, they are less concrete. One established couple said, “‘Community People’ do not have a sense of commitment.”

Several people described the way pastoral care is provided as another challenge. There seemed to be three main areas where difficulties had occurred in relation to this. The first was that some *established* church members thought that they were not receiving good pastoral care, as most of the resources were being directed towards the *newcomers* from the *community*. The second issue was the amount of pressure that this was putting on certain key individuals. The third was a perception that the support being offered may be making some people dependant. One interviewee worried about this and said, “Some of those I know, I think what they need is not to be pandered to, but be encouraged to accept their responsibilities and accept the help that’s offered to them, without jumping in and doing things for them, which they really ought to take responsibility for themselves.”

The last comment was made when explaining that, in her opinion, there were two types of single parent which seemed to exist within the church: those who were self-sufficient, and those who needed a lot of pastoral care.

At the same time as the church was dealing with this tension, the *community* appears to have changed their view towards the church. The church history says that the greater involvement led to it “being accepted more and more by our neighbours as ‘their’ church”.¹⁰³

¹⁰²See Lidgate, B, et al, *Living Stones*, p39 – 44 for discussion of the city centre church in the early 1990s.

¹⁰³ Lidgate, B, et al, *Living Stones* , p43

Another factor leading to this increased receptivity among the community may be that, between 2003 and 2009, the church was host to a nursery, which was a partnership between Spurgeon's Childcare and Sure Start. Initially, this was only intended to be temporary, while new premises were sought, but it "continued until 2009, when due to reduced numbers, [the nursery] moved." The purpose of this move was to merge with another nearby.¹⁰⁴

In terms of the growth of a multi-cultural congregation, it was clear through observations and conversations that there are three main types of ethnic minority members of the church: student, asylum seeker and those employed within the medical sector. The predominant group are French-speaking from central Africa. The church holds a Saturday afternoon meeting, which takes place in both French and English, and involves worship, prayer and bible study for this sector of the congregation. Translation is available, according to the website.¹⁰⁵ One couple informally mentioned that some within this group are currently being developed as future leaders for the church. The work with the international community emerged around the same time as the family centre. The church history explains that in 2003, a couple "started an International project on Sunday afternoons, where overseas visitors (mainly students and asylum seekers) could share in conversation, eat together and, if they desired, join evening worship." This project stopped, but the Saturday afternoon meeting appears, at least in part, to act as a replacement.

For asylum seekers, over the last decade, the church has developed a group which provides "a social drop-in session for asylum seekers, refugees and their families." In addition to social activities, this group also offers "access to other agencies for advice each week." The church has also been running English language classes over the last ten years or so, although these are coming to an end, as the volunteer who was the driving force behind these is moving on, to become co-ordinator for the pastoral care within the church. These activities grew out of initial contacts with asylum seekers in the area. Their continuing approach of working with other agencies led to, for a time, a partnership with a local non-governmental organisation (NGO). When the NGO withdrew from the project, the drop-in continued with the help of volunteers, who came from within and beyond the congregation.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴Lidgate, B, et al, *Living Stones*, p 44.

¹⁰⁵ [City Centre Church website] accessed 20/4/11.

¹⁰⁶ See Lidgate, B, et al, *Living Stones*, p 43 for a discussion of the development of worship services, language classes and support given to foreign nationals including asylum seekers and refugees – particularly West Africans within the congregation.

It was remarked upon during an interview with one couple, who had attended the church for about fifty years, since they were students, that in the '90s, the members of the church (and small groups) did a lot of courses, including *Purpose Driven*.¹⁰⁷ This began, alongside the development of small groups, in 1991, when the leadership of the church decided to put a greater focus upon discipleship.¹⁰⁸ There came a point when, according to this couple, the church began to question what the purpose of all these courses was, and they decided to start doing more community-based work. Many house groups still follow formal materials, though, and it is perhaps the perception of, and emphasis on, the courses which has changed, rather than their use. The one course that the church did do during this period, which was seen as *community*-based, was *Alpha*; this first ran in 1998, and from 2004 onwards, became an established part of the church programme.¹⁰⁹

These types of groups will be returned to later in this chapter, but for now, it is useful to note that their development appears to have occurred around the same time as the church began engaging more with both the *community* and the wider Evangelical sub-culture. It is also at this time that the church developed its first 'mission statement'.¹¹⁰

The buildings and leadership of the church also changed between the mid 1900s and the period around the millennium, with the current minister taking up the pastorate in 1996 and a refurbished building being opened in 2002.¹¹¹

According to the church website, the average congregation contains about two hundred people; this is certainly around the figure observed, although there was variation around the school holidays (lower numbers) and at special events, such as the commissioning of the assistant pastor (higher numbers).¹¹² The membership list for the church had one hundred and sixteen names on it at the end of 2010, which was a net loss of three people from the figure at December 2009.¹¹³ It listed one hundred and

¹⁰⁷ *Purpose-Driven* courses were derived from the writings of Rick Warren, and include *The Purpose-Driven Life* and *Purpose-Driven Church*. I understand from my interviewees that *The Purpose-Driven Life* was much better received than *The Purpose-Driven Church*. Rick Warren was one of the keynote speakers at the Baptist World Alliance conference in Birmingham in 2005, and so his writings could be seen as 'approved of', both on a denominational and church level.

¹⁰⁸ Lidgate, B, et al, *Living Stones*, p39.

¹⁰⁹ Lidgate, B, *Living Stones* p 43.

¹¹⁰ Lidgate, B, *Living Stones*, p 39.

¹¹¹ Lidgate, B, *Living Stones*, p42 explains that this extensive remodelling of the church took place thanks to two generous legacies.

¹¹² [City Centre Church website] (accessed 12/3/11).

¹¹³ [City Centre Church] Annual Report 2010.

seventeen people earlier in the year. Of this list, 41% lived within the same postcode district as the church, and the rest of the congregation was gathered almost entirely from other postcode districts in the same city. Interviews indicated that, in recent years, there had been a growth of membership from within the local community. The majority of those attending from the church's postcode district are under sixty (which reflects the age mix in the ward); in the other contributing areas, there were far fewer people aged in their 20s and many more in their 60s and 70s.¹¹⁴

This growth in members from the immediately surrounding area is something which has been part of a deliberate strategy, related to the changing ethos of the church. One key feature of this is the building of links between the church and the parents of children attending events there. The key event, which has been particularly popular, is the children's club formed in 2005, mentioned previously, which meets on a Friday evening and is aimed at children aged five to eleven. The assistant pastor has responsibility for it. It builds links with the families by visiting the children at home each week to see how they are doing, and giving them an activity sheet for the following week. As the website puts it, "In this way we can support the children in their home situations, develop relationships with parents and carers, and be seen as part of the community."¹¹⁵ This brings the church into contact with a number of single parent families. The co-ordinator of this work is very clear that it should support single parent fathers as well as mothers. She described how this support works within her interview:

"A lot of these guys have had a terrible time themselves and they just haven't got, they just need, someone to tell them: 'no, you're not rubbish and yes, you can be a good parent and you know this is how to do it'. And they need other guys to be around to tell them how to do it, as well as women... I'm thinking of one, and I know you shouldn't generalise from one, but you know a lot of the guys are surrounded by women a lot of the time, so they actually, they come to church to, that's one of the ways the church can be really effective, because we have can have the guys who are dads who are, um, who are in stable relationships and all of that. They can take all of that and they can share how they do it just as, not in a formal way...We show them how to fix shelves to the wall, we'll talk to them about what it means when their teenage daughter, I mean can you imagine, single dad and teenage daughter and hormonal things. We say, 'what do we do?' 'How do we deal with this?' 'Am I going over the top with the discipline?' You know just to have somebody to sit down and reflect with and chat with. And to

¹¹⁴ In 2001, the number of people aged over 65 living in the area was 11.2%, compared with 16% in the city as a whole. The number of people aged under 45 was 74.3%, compared to 62.9% in the city as a whole. ([http://www.newcastle.gov.uk/core.nsf/a/info \[ward](http://www.newcastle.gov.uk/core.nsf/a/info%5Bward) the church is located in] (accessed 14/3/11).

¹¹⁵ [City Centre Church website] (accessed 20/4/11).

have both a male and a female to chat that over with. If you're a single dad, or a single mum to have those influences, so that you can get the perspective of both of those, that's got to be hugely helpful."

Self-Identity

The self-identity of the congregation is one which appears to be constantly evolving as they react to both the challenges and opportunities which being located in an area of social deprivation provide. Specifically, one area of challenge and opportunity relates to engagement with the local community and those agencies and organisations who are also involved with it due to the nature of its socio-economic make up.

Looking at the church annual report for 2010, its current vision and corresponding values are identified, and these reflect the challenges and opportunities referred to above. Firstly, the vision for the church is described in the following way:

"In 2010, we continued in our conviction that our mission – the job God has given us to do, to realise, the vision – has remained as:

"We are here to know God better,

"To be equipped to serve Him in the world,

"To grow together in love for one another

"And to win others for Christ... especially strengthening, supporting and helping families in the [name of where the church is located] area."¹¹⁶ This has been developed into being described as their mission statement on the website.¹¹⁷

Secondly, in the annual report, there is a description of how this vision translates into specific values. These are related to two passages of scripture: 1 Corinthians 13:13 and Micah 6:8. The resulting list of values is as follows:

"Love: above everything we show the grace of Jesus to all people

"Faith: we trust in God who is faithful to all His promises

"Hope: we seek to give people reasons to see a better future for themselves and improve circumstances wherever we can

¹¹⁶ [City Centre Church] annual report 2010, p4.

¹¹⁷ [City Centre Church website] (accessed 20/4/11).

“Justice: we treat everyone fairly, speak up prophetically for the marginalised and do what we can to alleviate inequality

“Mercy: we show forgiveness, kindness, and sympathy to others

“Humility: we aim to benefit others before ourselves, seek to do our personal best for Christ without bragging, encourage others to achieve their best without being critical or jealous of them.”¹¹⁸

These values recognise the context in which the church is rooted, and the needs of those within the local community. Thus, implicit within this ‘vision and values’ statement is a commitment to support various groups, including single parents and asylum seekers.

The congregation is denominationally aligned to the Baptist Church of Great Britain, but, as will be explained later when discussing the influence of para-church organisations, it regards them primarily as a resource provider. However, this, together with their membership of the Northern Baptist Association, is listed within the ‘vision and values’ page of the website, and arguably the connection runs deeper. Other para-church links mentioned on the site are local, related to *Churches Together* and *Together in Christ*. The latter is an organisation of Evangelical churches, whose leaders regularly pray together. This section of the website also highlights their membership of the Evangelical Alliance.¹¹⁹ Therefore, through their affiliation to these para-church groups, as opposed to a specific statement in their ‘vision and values’, they affirm the Evangelical identity that the church now has.

On the website, they have changed these ‘visions and values’ slightly. The ones which they are publicly displaying now say,

“Our vision is to be a light on the hill for God,

- Shining His light out into the community
- Attracting people by that light and bringing them into contact with Christ.

We aim to do this by:

- Being a covenant people
- Being a prayerful people
- Coming together regularly to worship an awesome God, and meet with the living Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit

¹¹⁸[City Centre Church] annual report 2010, p4.

¹¹⁹ [City Centre Church website] (accessed 20/4/11).

- Taking God's 'light' out into the community and opening the doors of the church in ways which make those outside want to come in and find out more about the God we worship and serve
- Being a place where we are encouraged to become better disciples of Christ in an environment where everyone can be nurtured and grow in their personal relationship with God and Jesus Christ.
- Giving all those who are part of the church family the opportunities to discover and develop their God-given gifts and help them to find ways of expressing themselves in service to others
- Providing a safe, encouraging place for people to develop and grow and where everyone is welcome.
- Enthusiastically committing all we can of our time, energy and money as our response to sound Biblical teaching and the challenge God gives us to serve him in the Church and in the world.
- Recognising that the local church is part of God's wider picture and plan."¹²⁰

While terms such as "*sound Biblical teaching*" and "*personal relationship with God and Jesus Christ*", as well as the para-church links noted above, indicate the church's Evangelical identity, this set of values could be seen as appropriate for any mainstream congregation, whether Evangelical or not. They emphasise the clear focus that this congregation has on social action and community, as well as the way they view the church as a family. This may be why, although they do run regular *Alpha* courses, these seem to be secondary to involvement within the local community as a way of attracting people and evangelising. Therefore, one might argue that, though the church has become Evangelical in outlook over the last quarter of a century or so, it still retains some of its previous theological focus.

The church has a mixed-gender leadership, and this was something everybody interviewed seem to view as positive. In terms of the benefits to single mothers, one of the single parents interviewed explained why this was important to her.

"I've got a background of quite a lot of different abusive situations. It makes me more likely to talk to a female and it can be difficult in every walk of life finding a strong female role model, because I'm a very strong person myself. To find somebody to look up to, and also you know to be able to share stuff that you certainly wouldn't want to

¹²⁰ [City Centre Church website] (accessed 20/4/11).

share with a male leader in any way, or feel comfortable about. It, again it just works. She's there, and you don't have to share things because it's silently understood."

Thus, this church seems to have made a genuine attempt over recent years to put its 'vision and values' statement into practice, but this has bought with it some tension.

The Role of Small Groups

There are a range of small groups in the city centre church. In the 2010 Annual Report, thirteen small groups were described, all of which were given titles relating to who the leaders were, where they were located, the purpose of the group or, in one case, simply when the group met. One of these had closed during the year, but the rest seemed to be vibrant, and one group not mentioned within the report, which had been previously observed, was for women and had grown out of an *Alpha* course.

The reports of the groups were not always shining, and reflected the wider struggles which members of the church had been going through during the year. They also illustrated the way the groups reflected the lives of the members, and accepted that they may not always be able to attend.

One group said, "We have not settled into any study we've undertaken and seem to have drifted through the year. Having said that, house group is always well attended and our... times of sharing and prayer are rarely a struggle, and we frequently run out of time." A report from another of the small groups (which did contain some single parents), reported, "This year, many of us have faced issues of poor health, losing a loved one, waiting for refugee status to be granted, looking for work or being very busy in a job! There is, however, lots of support and help to be found within the group."

Another one of the groups described their meetings as "like a spiritual sandwich bar – people who love to meet with each other and find out what is going on talk excitedly, and then sample the snack of the day, and then depart, and may or may not be at the next meeting, depending on what other activities Jesus calls them to. All of this results in great fellowship, even if things do get a bit disjointed from time to time."¹²¹

This description of the small groups shows how the relational aspects, as well as the spiritual, were important. In several of the small groups observed in this church, it was not unusual to see the bible study they were concentrating on put to one side, in order to deal with the wider concerns of the members, including on one occasion a parenting problem a single mother was facing. Interviews with single parents in particular

¹²¹ See City Centre Church] *Annual Report 2010* pp 12- 14 for a discussion of their small groups.

indicated this was quite common. One woman, who had been a member of several of the small groups, described what happened in the following way:

“They don’t try and rush forward with the work they’re trying to do if someone needs some wrap-around care from the groups, and quite often your study can be put aside to realise the immediate ... you always gain something extra from when you put it aside; there’s always something else there. And as I say, we’ve got beautifully calm leaders and elders, who realise that when God’s speaking, that we just need to clear the path to allow him to come down and put his grace upon us in whatever way and touch us at groups and their agenda just needs to, um..... [the interviewee trailed off here]”.

These groups then can be seen to take a qualitative approach to success, where the emphasis is on the journey the individual is taking, rather than specific moments of conversion or acts of service.

Underlying Attitudes to Single Parents

During discussions with *established* members, there was often mention of one of the current elderly members of the congregation, who had been a single parent many years ago, and whose children had grown up in the church. This person was held up as an example of one type of single parent (self-sufficient single parent), and the reason the church was comfortable with them. This was sometimes contrasted with some of the single parents from the *community*, who made up most of that subset of the church. There was some dis-ease expressed, as explained earlier, regarding the level of pastoral support they required. There was also a distinction made regarding a single father, who had become a single parent as a result of becoming a widower. He was, within interviews, often given a kind of heroic status; during my interview with him, however, there was no indication he was aware of being viewed in this way. He was simply grateful for the practical and emotional support he received from the church.

One interviewee described how she felt “blessed” when she saw him in the church. Another described being able to talk with him about his bereavement and help him through it as being “a real thrill”. While he was quite non-committal about his role in the church, referring to just popping in and helping out from time-to-time, others went into more detail. The assistant pastor explained how he helped make tea and coffee for the toddler group parents, and helped set up for various events within the church. This heavier level of involvement was certainly what was observed. He regularly helped with a variety of small tasks, and provided food for the drop-in. A number of people

informally commented on the quality of food he provided, before making some positive comment about him.

Having said all this, while the overall impression people tried to give was that single parents had always been welcome in the church, one interviewee made an interesting observation regarding the way the *established* member was viewed when she became a single parent, comparing it to how things currently happen.

“I don’t know, I think we’ve always thought, as I said before, she maybe needs a little bit of extra support. Apart from the obvious things at the time when you think, ‘Stupid woman, why did you get yourself in that state?’ which was something which was said at the time to her.... But you know because that was so long ago, that was quite a shock at the church. But when she was up and she was here with the kids, she was accepted I think without any difficulty. Now days we’re just glad people come.”

This comment suggests that the congregation are not as neutral on the issue as they would like to suggest. However, in practice, the church takes a welcoming stance, dealing with each individual as they find them. The single parents encountered appeared to understand this, were positive about their practical experience of the church, but wary about what they would share with whom. This is one reason why many found small groups useful, viewing them as safe places in which they could be honest about the reality of life.

One person, who described herself as having “come from a mad party lifestyle” explained:

“I’m quite an open person, but not everybody in the church knows what I’ve been through. They’ve probably got an idea, but not everybody knows, so it’s good to have somebody that you can speak openlyNot like having to hide your past...”

Another single parent, who was a member of a range of small groups, put it this way:

“I think... if I do need different support, I go to a different type of service. This church is always open to you walking in and saying you need to pray or that you’re upset because, you know, of somebody. There’s always... somebody about; you’re never ever alone. There’s always guidance and support; it’s always, always there, which is truly, truly wonderful.”

The overall impression was that the single parents knew who they could approach for support, and small groups were one part of this. For various reasons, several of them were ‘service users’ of various charities or government organisations. It appeared that some approached church in the same way. In one case, an interviewee explained how she had turned to the church when it seemed every other service provider in the city

had failed her. She also explained how she initially came into contact with it through the children's club and the associated outreach worker:

"I became involved because my kids came... here and I just got to know... the outreach worker. I was at breaking point then. I just had it. All the services... that were supposed to be helping us come off drugs just didn't seem to be doing much for us. So I really was at breaking point, and went to [a mission the church was involved in] and gave my life to God the first night and never looked back, never looked back."

This individual, and several other single parents, had received a significant level of support from one particular person which, as was gathered through informal conversation, was seen as problematic because of the resulting demands placed on them. Towards the end of the research period, the church was trying to remedy this, in part via a reorganisation of their pastoral care system and through the individual concerned trying to be more disciplined in her working patterns. On one occasion, she informally mentioned that her and her husband are, almost on a weekly basis, required to support people by sitting with a parent in the police station until about 3am.

The single parents interviewed had all received various types of support from the church; the nature of this differed according to the individual. One person had been able to take on a part-time paid job at the church, as well as having her leadership skills developed. Another had received practical help in dealing with discipline problems with her teenage daughter, as well as some financial help: "A couple of times I have, like when I've had ... problems with my benefits or whatever else, they've been there to support us and help us financially." It was not possible to ascertain whether this type of financial help was common, because a lot of the support given was on an informal, needs-assessed basis.

The different types and levels of support required reflect the comment of the church administrator, mentioned earlier, concerning the different mindsets of the single parents with which the church has contact. Some appear more willing than others to accept formally-given help, but many have complex lives and a number of additional factors affect their willingness to do so. For example, some of those interviewed were recovering from addictions, and others had experienced abuse. This meant that the help they were receiving was often not primarily linked to their status as single parents, but also to a wider, complex set of personal circumstances. Also, some of the single parents subscribed more fully to the church mindset, and participated in its prevailing culture, than others, having been part of that or another congregation for a longer period. This may have had an impact on their openness to receive formal help, but one was unable to ascertain how important this factor was, because most of those who

were less settled within the church culture also had the more complex sets of circumstances.

Working With Outside Groups

As previously mentioned, the congregation contains a mix of people, and we make the distinction between *established* members, from UK Baptist backgrounds, and *newcomers* from a range of countries and cultural backgrounds, as well as the de-churched and the unchurched from the local *community*.

From the discussion on ‘*A Changing Church, A Changing Congregation*’, we can see that the church is affiliated to a range of para-church organisations, and also uses resources from a number of others, as well as having links to a range of NGOs and charities. As far as one could tell, little distinction was made between those organisations which the congregation formally belonged to (such as Willow Creek UK and Ireland) and those supported by individual members and used as additional resource providers. The exception to this was the Baptist Union of Great Britain, to which the church is denominationally-linked. It was sometimes described as a resource provider, but there are clearly strong links to networks and people. As previously noted, since 1988 the church has been affiliated to the Evangelical Alliance (EA). This is the main English body seen to represent Evangelicals in the UK. In order to join, a church had to agree to sign up to the statement of faith.¹²²

The church notice sheet and notice board indicated that members of the congregation, or the church as an organisation, have links to a range of local, national and international campaigns and organisations, related to both religious and social justice issues. Examples of these included Make Poverty History North East (promoting ‘The Wave’ demonstration), Scripture Union (promoting a training weekend), and the Barnabas Fund charity. The minister is a trustee for a local charity for homeless people.

The variety of groups represented, and the inclusion of materials from secular organisations, illustrates the way the church appears to be ready to make links with, and use the services of, different groups within their local, geographical and Christian cultural environments. The difficulty in discerning the church’s degree of affinity with various groups reflected the leadership’s acknowledgement of the diversity within the congregation. It seemed that if somebody was associated with a particular organisation and its aims fitted in with the church’s outlook on community involvement, social justice, evangelism and prayer, then space was given to their promotional literature in the church and sometimes within the weekly bulletin.

¹²²<http://www.eauk.org/about/basis-of-faith.cfm> (accessed 22/2/11)

This presented some difficulties in the research process, as it was difficult to identify the organisations with which the church had formal links and those which were related to the particular interests of individual members of the congregation. Moreover, the level of affinity the church as a whole had with a given organisation was sometimes hard to discern.

However, as explained above, these para-church organisations are primarily seen as resource providers. One of the groups which has supplied resources and help in the past is *Care for the Family*. This organisation is based in Cardiff, and provided a lot of support and advice when the mother of a family supported by the church became seriously ill and died.

The church has, as previously mentioned, been involved in working with a number of NGOs and charities, as well as government agencies, in relation to their work with asylum seekers, for example. The assistant pastor (and former outreach worker) has been particularly pro-active in seeking to single parents and others:

“I’ll go to anything. I just shout loudly and find out where and say ‘ok, what kind of help do you offer?’ And obviously, for debt we’ve used some of the debt counselling. I’ve found magistrates, people who work in the Magistrates’ Court very useful. They’ve pointed me in the direction of... really good legal advice for people and debt counselling... but we work in close association with the schools. Um, the community police, we go to for support and advice, you know, different things. It depends on what the issue is, but we’ll go to statutory or church things. It’s just because... advice is advice and we take it where we can get it.”

During 2010 a number of these organisations also provided funds for the activities of the church, particularly those supporting children or asylum seekers who were resident in the local community.¹²³ This approach of working with NGOs and charities, as well as para-church organisations, was seen as important by one interviewee. She lived locally and was a tenants’ representative. She described the church as having a role as a “community service” which has acted to “safeguard” the interests of the *community*:

“I’ve been involved ... in a lot of projects; they’ve – [the community organisations] - had a lot of money and I’ve been quite glad that in the excitement of I’ve got this budget, there’s a little voice ringing out there saying ‘hang on a minute, you know there’s a lot of need out there so let us be careful’. ... I think sometimes, its fundamental role is safeguarding. It’s a ...community service; it is entrenched and has served this community for many years and needs to be recognised. And you know,

¹²³ I was provided with a copy of the 2010 funding details for the different activities of the church. Some of these were self-funding, but many received grants as identified here.

listened to as a long standing member of the community, because, as I say, you see projects, a lot of things come and go and it's very, very necessary to have these entrenched things which are community safe places.”

Conclusion

This church is one which has clearly undergone a lot of change since the mid-1980s. This has involved both embracing Evangelicalism and reaching out further into the local *community*, however one might ultimately choose to define this. This movement has necessitated welcoming in a range of different people and family types from around the globe, as well as those from the city itself. In making these changes, the church and congregation appears to have been ready to take a flexible approach to working with a range of other resource providers, both Christian and non-Christian. They have at times, perhaps, stretched themselves further than they have felt comfortable with, or for which they truly had the resources. This relates primarily to what is required of people, both individuals and the congregation as a whole. As was said in one sermon, “it is all very well having a programme which looks good on a website, but if we are struggling to find people to staff our junior church on a Sunday morning, it suggests we may be getting our priorities wrong.”

The church has clearly been influenced, during these years, by the strategies, policies and fashions within and beyond the Evangelical sub-culture. Yet, it still maintains some element of the radical theology it was more identified with in the past. This mix of mainstream and Evangelical theology, together with the needs of the locality, has led to the development of a clear focus on social justice. This is mixed, though, with a need to support themselves while giving to others, and this has been central to the development of their small groups programme. Through being places of spiritual, emotional and practical care, these have enabled members of the congregation, to varying levels, to be supported while supporting others. Additionally, the history of the church is such that, for many years, single parents have been accepted, due to this being the situation of one long-standing member.

Therefore, this is a church which seeks to support single parents amongst others, partly through “Evangelical strategy”, but more through a genuine care which is highly relational in approach.

Comparison of Two Congregations

Introduction

Using Peter Brierley's 2005 Church Census definition, we define a large congregation as one containing over three-hundred people. The small town church has a regular congregation of around four-hundred people, and so falls into this category, where as the city centre church, with a congregation of around half this size, is more common according to Brierley.¹²⁴

The differences in size between the congregations, as well as the personal wealth of the members, affected the level of resources available to them. This had an impact in terms of the sort of work they were capable of carrying out independently, and thus their relationship with outside agencies, including para-church and secular non-governmental organisations. This is a theme which will be explored later. We need to note here that the small town church should be regarded, in some ways, as an exceptional case, as one family provided a large proportion of their funds.

The two congregations displayed various other similarities and differences, which will be outlined in this chapter. Some of these were obvious, such as building designs or the demographics of their locations, but others were far more subtle, such as the denominational influences on the churches, for example. Moreover, some factors that, on the surface, appeared to constitute similarities, such as the Evangelical nature of the congregations, turned out to be far more complex and indicative of some of the differences.¹²⁵ Additionally, other aspects, such as the role of small groups within the churches, were considered briefly before commencing the study but emerged as vital in exploring the similarities and differences regarding the attitudes towards, and experiences of, single parents in each congregation.

The formal Sunday worship of the churches displayed some obvious similarities: notices were projected prior to the worship commencing, as well as being contained within paper notice sheets, and these both detailed the week's activities and the preachers for the current and coming Sundays. Both congregations used contemporary music and a range of instruments, with 'worship leaders' leading the singing; the dominance of contemporary songs over traditional hymns, which were also used, was

¹²⁴ See Brierley, P, *Pulling out of the Nosedive: A Contemporary Picture of Church Going: What the 2005 Church Census Reveals*, Christian Research, London, (2006). In this, he uses the five-hundred people measure on p154 and the three-hundred people measure on p 162.

¹²⁵ Roberts, D, *Is Evangelicalism Dying?*, Christianity, January 2000 – <http://www.christianitymagazine.co.uk/features/is%20Evangelicalism%20dying%20ignite.aspx> (accessed 17/5/11).

a common factor. Those leading worship would occasionally raise their hands, but overt charismatic displays were unusual; members of the city centre congregation were more likely to do this than those in the small town church. The prayers took similar forms in both churches, and many people followed the scripture readings using the 'pew bibles'. In both cases, the New International Version seemed to be the congregational preference, despite the small town church using the New King James Version. Thus, at a superficial glance, these two churches are very similar, yet there are some differences in worship style.

In the small town church, the children were generally handed over to the children's workers – who were wearing a uniform of colourful t-shirts – prior to the start of the service, where as those in the city centre church would sit with their parents before leaving for their small groups, and would sometimes wander around the building. The presentation in the small town church was always slick, with the loop being projected prior to the service and including a countdown to its beginning. The worship leader would invariably be smartly dressed, often in a well-pressed pair of suit trousers, where as it was common for the leader in the city centre church to wear jeans or cords. Additionally, unless giving a notice or some kind of testimony, the speakers in the small town church were male, where as in the city centre church, there was equally strong male and female involvement in leading worship.

The similarities in the presentation of worship, and differences in attitudes towards children and dress, were indicative of the nature of the congregations' engagement with the Evangelical sub-culture, particularly in terms of the thought of mega-church leaders in the United States, such as Bill Hybels and Rick Warren.¹²⁶ The congregational studies indicated that these varying approaches to that wider cultural backdrop could largely be explained by looking at the wider socio-economic groups with which the churches chose to engage. Moreover, the degree of emphasis on being either a gathered or local church was a factor. This will be elaborated upon later, as we explore how the above relates to denominational allegiance and approaches to evangelism, leadership, church growth and small groups. The key focus, however, will be on the impact upon the congregations' attitude to single parents.

¹²⁶ Bill Hybels is the leader of Willow Creek, and both churches were members of the *Willow Creek Britain and Ireland* organisation. Rick Warren is pastor of Saddleback Valley Community Church and author of *The Purpose-Driven Church* and *The Purpose-Driven Life*.

Past and Present Influences on Congregational Ethos and Identity

The size of the small town congregation was a significant factor in shaping its highly focused approach to ministry; they employed three pastors with different responsibilities, including one for small groups. Moreover, it explained why the small town congregation relied as heavily as it did on small groups to form 'connectional glue' between members.¹²⁷ The historic and contemporary influences on each church were also important in this context.

The city centre church described itself as being part of a mainstream denomination, the Baptist Union of Great Britain. By contrast, the small town church regarded itself as being independent of any denomination, while acknowledging a heritage firmly rooted in the Plymouth Brethren. Observations, and informal comments made throughout the course of the research, suggested that some *established* members of the small town congregation held stronger ties to their denominational tradition than was generally the case with members of the city centre church.¹²⁸ They seemed to primarily regard the Baptist Union as one resource provider among many, albeit one with which they had stronger links than with many other para-church organisations.

These denominational influences were most clearly expressed in regards to the churches' attitudes towards gender, and the nature and influence of elders or deacons within the congregations. The Plymouth Brethren believe that it is inappropriate for women to be in leadership roles within a mixed congregation. This was reflected in the life of the small town church, and was commented upon in some of the interviews as being an area of contention. The Baptist Union of Great Britain has formally, at a denominational level, accepted the legitimacy of women in leadership positions, including as ministers, since 1922.¹²⁹ While individual congregations are free to accept or reject this policy as they wish, the city centre church did embrace the ministry and leadership of women at all levels.

The above had a direct impact on the experience of single parents, which will be further explored. For now, it suffices to note that if most people identified as single parents are female, and one congregation embraces women in leadership, whereas the other excludes them from leading mixed groups, then the opportunities for single parent involvement differed significantly between the two churches.

¹²⁷ See Bob Jackson, *Going for Growth*, London, Church House Publishing, (2006)

¹²⁸ Chaves argued that many independent congregations have this type of recognisable tradition, although they are not formally part of a specific denomination (p22).

¹²⁹ The Baptist Union of Great Britain, *Women, Baptists and Ordination*, Didcot, Baptist Union of Great Britain, (2006).

Both churches were congregational in nature; their 'formal' members make decisions about the direction each organisation should take, and both had a management committee to facilitate this process. The eldership of the small town congregation appeared to have a much more direct influence over its decision-making compared to the deaconate of the city centre church. This again relates to the historical processes of the two denominations.

Evangelical Identity

In the chapter concerning the small town church, we discussed David Bebbington's definition of Evangelicalism, which has been acknowledged by many commentators over the course of the last decade as being the 'standard' definition.¹³⁰ His quadrilateral consisted of *conversionism, activism, biblicalism* and *crucicentrism*, and has been further elaborated upon by Timothy Larsen and Rob Warner, with the latter adding *Christocentrism, transformed life* and *revival aspirations* to the definition.¹³¹ On this basis, both congregations could be described as Evangelical in the more elaborated sense, but differences in emphasis existed between the two, which we now explore. Again, these are related to the denominational backgrounds of the churches. Moreover, the small town congregation had always been Evangelical, whereas this theological self-identification was much more recent within the city centre congregation.

The small town church has a more reformed and overtly Calvinistic theology than the city centre church, and this manifests itself in the former placing a stronger emphasis on crucicentrism, as opposed to Christocentrism. There is a clear focus on Christ in both congregations, but the theology of the small town church centres more on the atoning nature of his death, with the city centre church looking more at the gospel accounts of Jesus' life. Moreover, the small town church focuses more heavily on conversionism and revival aspirations than the city centre church, which places greater emphasis on activism and the importance of a transformed life. Both congregations take biblicism very seriously.

This may explain the emphasis on activism in the latter, often expressed beyond Evangelicalism as a concern for social justice, and the reliance of the former on small group courses such as *Alpha* and *Christianity Explored*, seeking to impart a basic theological education in non-believers and 'seekers'. Members of the congregation

¹³⁰ Bebbington, D, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*.

¹³¹ Elaborated on by Larsen and Trier (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Evangelical Theology and Warner, R, Reinventing English Evangelicalism*, p19.

were encouraged to invite others to these courses, and they were set up and advertised in order to facilitate this method of outreach. In terms of being part of the way the small town congregation develops growth, the small groups' pastor said, "They will bring people here. Whether it's ... an Alpha meal or Christianity Explored meal they will bring friends and invite people." However, when discussing growth in the city centre one of the leaders there explained, "we have set up things and that have helped. You know our, arts and crafts club and our Kids Club". Both are relational approaches, but that of the small congregation involves people coming in to discuss the bible, while that in the city centre involves encouraging people to encounter the bible through activity.

These differing emphases on evangelism or social justice may go some way to explain the differences in the congregations' interactions with single parents, with the city centre church seeming to take a more integrated approach. For that congregation, their interaction with single parents – as with other groups such as asylum seekers - relates to their activism. They have over a period of time changed their view of what "being church" meant through bible study and prayer. One of the leaders explained, "We very much felt this was a call from God to open our doors to the families in our community and to be a resource in the community and we had to work out what that meant and we're still in the process of working out what that means for us now, but we're further along the road than we were."

In practice, the above meant that everybody was encouraged to play a full part in the life of the church, regardless of their background or length of time in the congregation. In particular, formal bible studies were often set aside to deal with immediate pastoral concerns of small group members. Contrastingly, in the small town congregation, the single parents' group was focused more obviously on nurture and mutual care than on the explicitly stated aims of the church, and thus there was some difficulty in reconciling that work with the Evangelical ethos of the congregation as a whole, which was focused more on achieving conversion or developing service through their small groups. The group's inclusive approach of organising themselves around principles of mutual care and self-help more closely mirrored that of the city centre congregation, Both appeared to measure 'success' *qualitatively*, while the small town church as a whole seemed to take a more *quantitative* approach. This difference in approach is a recurring theme throughout the course of this chapter.

The Wider Evangelical Sub-Culture and Its Influence

We now turn to the contemporary Evangelical context. Both churches were affiliated to Willow Creek and the Evangelical Alliance, and used the *Alpha* course material produced by Holy Trinity, Brompton, but in different ways. While Rick Warren and the *Purpose-Driven* approach were only explicitly mentioned within the city centre church, their imprint could clearly be seen in the small town congregation.¹³² A couple interviewed from the city centre church explained how there had been an emphasis on courses, such as those advocated by Willow Creek and Rick Warren, during the 1990s. However, there had been a reaction against these materials when house groups studied Warren's *Purpose-Driven Church*, and the emphasis in the congregation moved to activism in the local community. In both churches, it became clear that the leadership had not entirely 'bought into' any of these organisations; rather, they were viewed as resource providers. However, the hallmarks of Willow Creek and the *Purpose-Driven* approach were clearly identifiable both churches, to a greater extent in the small town congregation. There were a range of reasons for this.

The small town church was itself a resource provider to *Alpha* and Willow Creek, and one of its unpaid elected leaders was a respected national businessman, who had been a speaker at conferences organised by Holy Trinity, Brompton. Additionally, it had acted as a venue for these organisations in the past. Consequently, this congregation enjoyed a relationship with these para-church organisations which was based on a greater level of mutuality than was normal. For this relationship to have existed, there needed to be a convergence of underlying values. These were the values which stemmed from being Reformed Evangelicals dedicated to seeking to achieve both church growth through attendance at formal services, and conversions leading to baptism and membership. These are all factors whose success can be measured in quantitative form, as mentioned earlier. To some extent, the city centre congregation reacted against these values. Their approach to church growth was based on people connecting with the activities of the church in a wider form and through seeing lives changed practically, as well as possibly having a conversion experience.

Warren identifies five levels of commitment: *community-unchurched*, *crowd-regular attendees*, *congregation-members*, *committed – maturing members* and *core-lay ministers*. In this approach, the church community are not defined by the geographical area. Interviewees indicated that the term '*community*' was one of some contention. In

¹³² Evidence that at least some of the senior leadership of the small town church are linked into the same sub-cultural environment as Rick Warren can be seen through things such as the involvement of both Rick Warren and one of the small town congregation elders at a recent leadership conference. <http://www.jesushouse.org.uk/holy-trinity-brompton-leadership-conference> (accessed 11/06/11).

the city centre congregation, it was clear that it was never used in the same sense as by Warren, and while how it was employed differed between interviewees, it which was generally understood in geographical terms. The church administrator explained that the term *community* really covers the whole congregation, which extends a distance from the local area; from the coast in the east to [an area outside of the city] on the west.”

The small town church’s main focus of engagement was, by contrast, primarily the *unchurched*, rather than the local, geographical community. Its approach to outreach and growth centred on inviting family and friends as ‘guests’ to *Alpha* courses, and as indicated in the section on leadership, was based upon, and expanded through, kinship and social ties. The guests would be accompanied by the church member to the launch event and then often the course, and the same approach was taken with the *Christianity Explored* courses. With the latter, the focus centred more on refining the theology of those who had made contact through the *Alpha* course, and encouraging greater involvement in church life.

One consequence of this strategy was that those invited along, through already being part of the social networks of existing members, were more likely to already share some of the outlook and ethos of those in the church. This tendency to invite people of a similar age and social outlook meant it was less likely that single parents would become a target group. This congregational homogeneity is reflected in the American mega-church approach. In *The Purpose-Driven Church*, Warren speaks of “personalizing your target” and having a “typical unchurched person your church wants to reach”.¹³³ From the interviews and observations, his approach was not so deliberately and calculatingly adopted by the small town church; however, it definitely underpinned their strategy to a certain extent. Therefore, single parents were not part of the typical ‘target market’ for this congregation.

This was in marked contrast to the city centre congregation’s approach. In this church, there was a hope that members would invite friends and family along, but there was a far greater emphasis on encouraging more involvement by those who were already in contact with them in some way, without being a member of the congregation. There was a sense in which *Alpha* courses were seen as a bridge, helping people to move from engaging with the church as a an institution whose primary function was to meet a tangible need, related to their body or mind, to one whose purpose was to meet needs related to their soul. Thus, the initial point of contact was more likely to be one of the

¹³³ See Warren, R, *The Purpose Driven Church Growth Without Compromising Your Message and Mission*, Grand Rapids, Zondervan, (1995). For discussion of: Warren’s five levels of commitment see p130; targeting your audience p169 .

church's other outreach activities, rather than the course itself. This seems to be another manifestation of the church's emphasis on activism as a way of proclaiming the gospel and reaching people in the local community.

These differing recruitment strategies reflected the wider approaches to growth in each church. The city centre congregation sought to grow in and through the local community, and building relationships and bridging the gap were crucial, as well as developing discipleship and service within the congregation. A key initiative in this regard was the Kids Club, and as there were many single parent families in the locality, this strategy would inevitably lead to engagement with this particular segment of the community. This reflects a willingness, as we mentioned earlier, to view church growth in largely qualitative terms. Given the ethos of service among the leadership team, which will be explored later, this is perhaps what one would expect to see, as this mindset filters through to the whole congregation.

It is interesting that Warren himself admits he is somebody who feels "right at home with entrepreneurial businessmen, managers and professionals"; he has noticed that they are attracted to his ministry. He goes on to say that "you'll best reach people like you."¹³⁴ Such middle class professionals were the dominant group observed in the small town church. One interviewee commented on the congregational make-up, and particularly those who are visible within the church: "They are very middle class and you wouldn't get anybody up like I know."

The city centre congregation appeared to be actively working against targeting a particular subset of the congregation. Various interviewees talked about the way the church had changed and actively sought to be more inclusive of local people, who were mostly not middle class. One leader spoke of the way they used to suffer from coming across to people as somewhat exclusive: "We were terribly sincere but we weren't very effective maybe at sharing that, 'we're just the same as you'".

From individual discussions, it appeared that most core members of the church were nearing, or had recently taken, retirement or semi-retirement, and were graduates who had worked in the public services. There were a high number of teachers and people from health-care backgrounds. There appeared to be a desire amongst this group to stay rooted within the city centre, and work as advocates for disadvantaged groups. The value of this approach was summed up by one interviewee who was involved in the local community but in a role outside the church. She explained how the church leaders approached this role by talking of her own experiences of sitting in meetings and so forth with them. She said, " I've been involved as I say in a lot of projects

¹³⁴ For further discussion of Warren's targeting see Warren, R, *The Purpose Driven Church*, p176

they've had a lot of money and I've been quite glad that in the excitement of I've got this budget there's a little voice ringing out there saying "hang on a minute, you know there's a lot of need out there so let us be careful". I mean we say prayerful ... but I think... its fundamental role is safeguarding."

In terms of small groups, Warren advises that "it is unlikely that very many new members will join *existing* groups. New members assimilate best into new groups. You can even start new groups right out of your membership class. New members have their 'newness' in common".¹³⁵ This approach was articulated clearly by the small groups' pastor in the small town congregation, yet to a large extent, it was rejected by the city centre church. This mindset had also filtered through to the wider small town congregation.

In the city centre congregation members were more likely to sit with different people each Sunday, both in the main service and afterwards when socialising over coffee, rather than establishing clear groups that sat together, as was the case in the small town congregation. It was highlighted in interviews that single parents could, if they wished, be anonymous in the small town congregation. This was a mixed blessing, in that it gave those who felt less confident in engaging with other people some space, but could increase feelings of isolation and loneliness. For newcomers, movement into a social group was almost exclusively dependent upon becoming part of a formal small group, if not introduced through an existing member of the congregation.

Both churches believed in the importance of small groups, as evidenced by their membership of the Willow Creek Association; however, there was a very different approach taken within them. In the small town congregation, the primary purpose of small groups was theological education, whereas in the city centre church, the provision of immediate pastoral care had a much stronger emphasis.¹³⁶ The exception to this in the small town congregation was the single parents' group, which concentrated much more on providing pastoral care than on giving theological education. This is something else that will be returned to as the chapter develops.

Finally, differences in church growth strategy were apparent. The city centre congregation seemed to measure 'success' *qualitatively*, in terms of the way people had 'grown in faith' or had been helped by the church, and this was reflected in the outlook of their leadership. Conversely, for the eldership of the small town congregation,

¹³⁵ See Warren, R, *The Purpose Driven Church* p 326 for his approach to small groups.

¹³⁶ Willow Creek is a resource provider but central to their philosophy of church growth is the development of small groups. Hybells, B, *Courageous Leadership*, Grand Rapids, Zondervan, (2002) and Donahoe, B, *Building a Church of Small Groups, A Place Where Nobody Stands Alone*, Grand Rapids Zondervan (2001) both explain the philosophy behind this organisations approach.

growth and 'success' seemed primarily to be measured *quantitatively*, in terms of numbers of 'conversions', attendance figures at services and events, and income generated by the church.

Leadership

In the context of this study, the term 'leadership' operated at different levels. We first consider the city centre congregation.



Figure 1– Structure of the City Centre Church

In this model, the senior pastor is in overall charge of the church; they are elected by the congregation via a special church meeting, upon recommendation of the diaconate, who in turn act upon the advice of the denomination's regional minister. The assistant pastor is similarly elected by the whole church membership;. In this case, the position was voted upon after a recommendation from the diaconate. The assistant pastor has more of a pastoral role than the senior pastor, and in the city centre congregation, the introduction of this post reflected an extension of the families and outreach worker role.

The deacons are elected by the church meeting for a fixed term, and their role is to provide oversight and act as the management committee. Some members of the diaconate will have specific roles, such as church secretary or treasurer. These are church members of good standing who have been in membership for some time. There

were also some other staff members employed by the church. They are managed by the senior pastor and there is no requirement for them to be members. The small group leaders are core members of the church, and often are or have been deacons. They are under the oversight of the pastors and deacons, who review their role periodically.

There are a range of activities that take place in the church, and there are a range of members who volunteer their time to run or assist with these groups and projects. Often, they will be people who are already fulfilling some other role, such as that of deacon or small group leader, but this is not exclusively the case.

Church members are people who have been received into the formal membership of the congregation. This happens via interview with the pastor and two other church members. Following an interview report, the church meeting then votes to welcome them into membership. Often, church members who are not involved in volunteering will be elderly members of the congregation who have previously been volunteers, small group leaders or deacons. All church members will have made a profession of faith, normally through adult baptism.

This congregation does not view 'church' as something which happens only on a Sunday. They therefore view anybody who is in regular contact with a church activity as being part of the church, although not necessarily a member. This church believes in the priesthood of all believers. This means that although there is a hierarchical structure, there is a belief that all have equal worth. There is a conviction that different people have different callings and talents, which is why different people have different roles. The hierarchy is, therefore, seen to exist for mostly practical reasons.

The structure of the small town congregation is shown in the diagram below:

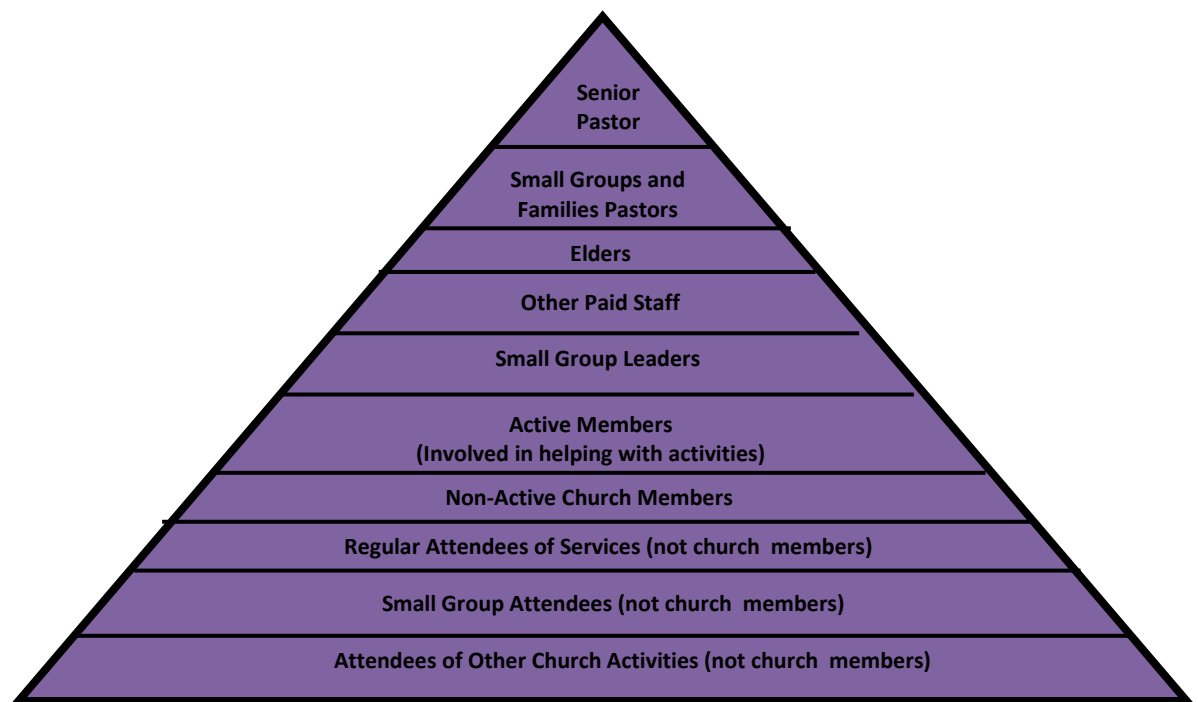


Figure 2 – Structure of the Small Town Church

The structure of the church changed during the research period, due to staff changes, so this description relates to things as they stood at the beginning of the research; this is therefore a snap-shot, yet is appropriate as the majority of interviews took place while this structure was in place.

The senior pastor is employed by the church. He is chosen by the elders and then the church vote to ratify the elders' decision. He acts as overall manager of the organisation. The other pastors are employed in similar roles, but with specific areas of responsibility. The elders are recommended by the existing eldership and the pastors; their names are then taken to a church meeting for ratification. The paid staff is employed by the church and are under the direction of the elders and pastors.

The small group leaders are picked by and responsible to the small groups' pastor. In some cases though, group leaders already existed prior to the appointment of the small groups' pastor, and in this situation, they had previously been approved/appointed by the pastor and eldership. Those volunteering and assisting with activities were church members who have made a profession of faith and are judged to be in good standing with the church. The relevant pastor will have been involved in making this assessment of them and approving their involvement.

Church members are people whose membership has been approved by the elders. They are people who will have made a profession of faith and have been baptised as adults. Again, if they are non-active, they will often be elderly members of the congregation who have previously had more active involvement. Those who attend regularly who are not members are nevertheless regarded as being part of the church, but they will not be able to be actively involved. Those who attend small groups will be encouraged to attend church and then to become church members.

Those who do not attend formal services or small groups are regarded as being on the periphery. While their details are likely to be on the church database, and may be used in calculating its size, they will not be seen as being part of the church in the same way as would be the case in the city centre congregation. In the study, it was clear that in the small town congregation, this attitude was particularly prevalent in relation to the mums and toddlers group; one interviewee said that church mums did not tend to go to this group, which is why, when her children were small, she formed a “mum’s fellowship” group.

Small group leaders, and those active members of the congregation who were in more informal leadership positions, were not approved by the churches as a whole and so potentially, their roles may not have been recognised by the wider congregation.

Each level of leadership exercised a degree of influence on the experience of single parents, and we now explore how this manifested itself in the churches. The pastors in both churches were the ‘public faces’ of their congregations, and were generally acknowledged as having a degree of influence in the wider context. They were responsible for the majority of the preaching in church services, and were heavily involved in pastoral work. Reflecting the observations made by Edgell and others in their studies of congregations – conducted on topics other than single parenting – it is apparent that the pastors or ministers therefore had to operate on several levels. This meant there were inevitably differences between what they communicated in public and private settings. This applied to the messages being conveyed in varying contexts about single parents. The differences in how this occurred in the two congregations were the result of a complex range of factors.

More careful consideration was given to what was publicly communicated, particularly in corporate settings, within the small town church. The reaction of the elected leadership was of particular concern, and the paid leaders seem somewhat constrained by the need to balance recognition of the complexities of modern life with traditional biblical teaching. For example, on one occasion, a small groups’ leader preaching on the subject of relationships struggled with proclaiming 1950s values and norms to a

contemporary congregation. This was expressed in comments that acknowledged the reality of divorce while not condoning it.

As previously stated, this congregation was rooted in a culture “reminiscent of gender relationships and responsibilities in the 1950s”. This extended to its view of family; as Edgell explains, it is not unusual for current patterns of church to be rooted in “a traditional nuclear family schema that was widely institutionalised in the religious expansion of the 1950s”, a theme which Penny Long Marler also explores within her congregational studies in America.¹³⁷ It seemed that among those in the congregations who managed to live up to this ideal, endorsement of any other model was considered inappropriate, a fact which was explored in the discussion of gender and leadership in the chapter on the small town church.

Interviews with single parents and conversations (both formal and informal) with the paid leadership of the small town church indicated an awareness of the complexities of twenty-first century family life that was absent from public preaching. It was apparent that they had moved from holding to the rigid positions expressed in their public rhetoric, to an understanding that different situations needed addressing in compassionate ways. They clearly held to the belief that the ideal is lifelong monogamous marriage between a man and a woman, but also acknowledged that life did not always run so smoothly. For one paid leader, this shift had come about from his own experience of being married to somebody who had previously been divorced, and thus having step-children. The knowledge that one of the paid leaders “really understood” was important to some in that church, who were single parents.

In neither church were single parents explicitly referred to during sermons; however, there was a more explicit emphasis on church being ‘family’ within the city centre congregation. The current senior pastor has been in charge of the ministry of the church for fourteen years. The assistant pastor gained this title during the research period, but had previously been employed as their outreach worker for seven years, and had been worshipping there for about a quarter of a century. Both were married with grown-up children, and members of the senior pastor’s extended family also attend the church, meaning he had another, different relationship with some of his congregation. The assistant pastor’s husband was also part of the elected leadership team. This set of relationships may have contributed to the leadership of the city centre church being seen more as a part of the worshipping community than was the case in the small town church, and to their more inclusive leadership style.

¹³⁷ See Edgell, P, *Rhetoric and Practice: Defining “Good Family” in Local Congregation* and Marler, P, *Lost in the Fifties* for a full discussion of the approach of pastors to the family and how this may be rooted in 1950’s schema.

The city centre congregation was somewhat diverse, and this may have helped bring about recognition that 'family' was a complex term for many in the church. As such, it was able to fulfil aspects of this function in a way which was not the case in the small town congregation. This certainly came across in interviews with two single parents and the assistant pastor of the city centre church. Moreover, interviews revealed that people often spoke of the leadership in informal terms, rather than simply seeing them as paid employees. This was encouraged through the 'open-door' approach of the leaders in this congregation. The language of family was used in relation to the leadership by several interviewees.

One remarked, while talking about the way the church had taken on the role of family for her " [the leadership] is very fatherly, but also because we've got women leaders, we've got your grandmother figure". Another spoke of the assistant pastor in terms of being her godmother: "the [assistant pastor] is my number one port of call, because she's my godmother as well."

The assistant pastor also commented on her relationship with members of the local community, acknowledging that "That's not the way, not the way perhaps that we're told we should do it". She explained, "I would view them as friends and they would view me as a friend; my husband and I we've been described as "you're our family now, you're our family" because we've journeyed through the deaths of parents and supporting the one who was left behind and things, and so we view ourselves as family. And they've been into our home and we've been into their homes you know." The lack of clear boundaries indicating the roles and responsibilities of the staff in the city centre congregation meant that the paid leaders (particularly the assistant pastor) were called upon in ways, and to an extent, that did not appear to be the case for leaders in the small town church.

The paid leaders (with the exception of the senior pastor) had emerged from within the city centre congregation; the influence of what Jeff Astley and others call 'ordinary theology' was appeared to be apparent.¹³⁸ The leaders were reflecting on their faith in light of their *lived experience*, as well as that described to them by the congregation and their observations of the wider community. They were working with people who often had low literacy skills, or for whom English was a foreign language, and this appeared to make them more open to engaging with single parents and others. For example, both members and non-members attended the annual church meeting, although only members could vote. In monthly church meetings, attendees regularly

¹³⁸ Astley, J, *Ordinary Theology*, Aldershot, Ashgate, (2002).

split into discussion groups, so that the views of all could be heard and fed back into the wider forum.

This open approach was different to that taken within the small town congregation. The paid leadership in that church had been in their roles for a shorter amount of time and so the connections between them and the congregation did not run so deep. There appeared to be more of an emphasis on their managerial role, although this was clearly the case with the senior pastors in both churches.

In the small town congregation, single parents only found out about the single parents' group if they happened to meet its leader, it did not appear to be formally recommended to people by the small groups' pastor. There were a range of reasons for this. Informally, some members of the congregation said that they thought that it was more of a social group intended to help single parents meet people. Others indicated that they were of the opinion "I've not always thought that the group is always that well advertised." Also, it was an *established* group, and there was a policy not to put *newcomers* into *established* groups.

The eldership of the small town congregation was more closely controlled by its existing members than the deaconate of the city centre church; moreover, there was not the same insistence that members only spend a limited term in their roles. As is the style of UCCF and other conservative Evangelical organisations, existing committee members 'invited' others to join them, with their names being offered to the church meeting to check there was no reason why they might be unsuitable. This group, as with all formal leadership positions in the church, except those in women-only groups, was exclusively male.

This was the level of leadership where kinship ties became important. A number of the people on the committee were related in some form or another, either through marriage or blood ties. The core of this church, its *established* members, was a tight-knit group, based on actual kinship ties and external social or professional links, as much as the church. This meant, according to one interviewee, that they were able to act as *powerbrokers*. The dominant family model amongst them was that of the traditional nuclear family.

In the city centre church, there was a core of leaders on the deaconate, which formed the equivalent committee, but they were actively seeking to develop and train new people from within the congregation to take on responsibility. Members of this committee were nominated and elected by the wider church community, with a vote being taken at a church meeting; there were set periods of service. The unpaid leaders

who sat on this committee were mixed in terms of gender, age, ethnicity and marital status; they included a single parent. Generally, the group were not related to each other, but on occasion they were, either directly or through marriage. The bond between the members of the city centre congregation was most clearly observable at the nine o'clock prayer meeting, where several of them shared the evening office and a period of calm reflection together, recharging their batteries. This core of people was instrumental in the church being able to fulfil its vision and do its work in the local community. They knew that, in a situation of limited resources but great need, they were all dependent upon each other for the 'project' to succeed. The church also seemed to be the common point of interaction for this group.

The group consisted of long-standing members of the church who were involved in many ways, including administration, running small groups within their homes and the church building, leading activities, acting as officers of the church (secretary and treasurer) and liaising with both the wider congregation and other organisations and churches. While some had paid support roles, most were unpaid volunteers who had devoted much time, money and energy to the church over the years. From informal conversations over coffee and meals within the city centre congregation, and observing them in a range of more formal activities, it was clear that this bond was based partly on enduring friendships, developed by working and sharing together over many years, but also through shared values. The values they appeared to share included the importance of marriage, although this appeared to be stronger among their equivalents in the small town congregation.

Attitudes to gender, and the homogeneous nature of its eldership, meant that it would be very unlikely that a single parent, unless possibly a widowed man, would be involved in the elected leadership of the small town congregation. Consequently, knowledge of issues affecting single parents was acquired second-hand, rather than through first-hand experience as was the case for some in the city centre congregation, as there were single parents on the diaconate.

The final stratum of leadership present in the two churches was that of small group leaders and those guiding individual activities. Often, these people were either elected or paid leaders, particularly within the city centre congregation, but occasionally others held these leadership positions. In the small town congregation, this was a level of leadership that women were allowed to take on, sometimes as part of a married couple, but more often as the leaders of women-only events. These leaders tended to be the wives of male elected leaders of the church. It is interesting, therefore, that when the leader of the single parents' group took on her role, she was single (she is now

married). This was regarded as appropriate because single parenthood is typically associated with women, and so it may have been assumed that it would be a single-sex group. In reality, it has often been a mixed-gender group, and so the only group within the church with a woman formally sanctioned to have leadership over men. This level of leadership then had a greater relevance in the small town congregation than the city centre church.

Due to the divisions between the *established* (from which the eldership were drawn) and *newcomer* members of the small town church, the paid leaders actually had a greater degree of autonomy when it came to small groups for *newcomers*, as the eldership had little direct involvement. Thus, in this informal stratum of leadership, negotiation occurred between the differences in public rhetoric and private practice. This will be explored further below, in the section on small groups. This level appeared to be the one at which change was being introduced, and innovation encouraged in the small town congregation. It was also the level at which single parent issues were most explicitly engaged.

Approaches to Small Groups

Small groups were an important part of both congregations, yet despite commonalities like running regular *Alpha* courses, there were clearly discernible differences in their approaches. These centred on the level of control exerted by the formal leadership and the extent to which small groups were expected to follow a set program. The approach in the city centre congregation was not prescriptive, and individual leaders had a degree of freedom in their approach, with the paid leadership exercising only a minimal degree of oversight. Consequently, not all of the small groups made use of formal resources, so while some did make use of DVDs and books, some were purely discussion-based or used resources prepared entirely by the leaders themselves. There was no obvious strategy apparent for these groups, though one gathered that in past, they had been encouraged to all use the same materials. Conversely, in the small town church, for part of the duration of the study, a small groups' pastor was employed, who developed a clear strategy and prepared or sourced written material for the groups, as well as organising occasional social activities to complement the study.

In the city centre congregation, it was not unusual for the bible study to be laid aside if a pastoral concern was raised, and the group would support the individual, as was appropriate. In some situations, the individual concerned would be taken aside for a private conversation, or some time would be arranged to address their particular need.

Sometimes, additional support would come through discussions over coffee afterwards. This contrasted with the small town congregation, where pastoral concerns appeared to be more likely to be dealt with by small group leaders at a later time. In the city centre church, the needs were often more immediate, relating to issues such as employment, bullying, housing problems or asylum applications, as well as health problems. There was a culture of people in small groups being happy to share their experiences and knowledge to help others. This experience often came from either being service users themselves, or from being involved in public service provision. These discussions often involved the person requesting help being signposted onwards, as well as being supported prayerfully within the group.

The city centre congregation did not seek to segment people, or provide any specific 'interest' groups beyond *Alpha*, although during the study period, one small group for women did exist. Consequently, there was no group containing only single parents, which in part may be due to the recognition that single parents are not purely defined by this characteristic, and each has unique needs and experiences which could only be properly understood and acknowledged by building relationships. This was identifiable during the interview with the assistant pastor, and was further backed up by other interviews, in which it emerged that single parents often had other issues impacting their lives for which they needed support unconnected with their status as single parents (e.g. addictions).

In the small town congregation, there was a greater degree of segmentation of members, primarily based on time within the congregation and family connections, but also with differentiation being made by gender. There was a specific group for single parents. This group differed from others in the church, both as mentioned earlier in that it was a mixed-gender group that had experienced female leadership, and in that it contained people from a range of congregations and fulfilled more of a social (as opposed to study) function. From interviews, it was clear that members of the group were unsure as to the level of recognition afforded to it by the wider congregation, despite the leader viewing it as being supported by the church. My observations indicated that leaders did not necessarily signpost *newcomers* to the group as a matter of course, despite knowing they were single parents.

This may have occurred because the single parents' group was an *established* group, and as was indicated, there was a policy of not directing *newcomers* towards *established* groups. Alternatively, it is possible that this occurred because the group did not fit in with the wider ethos of the church as clearly as some others, both in terms of it fulfilling more of a social function, but also due to it not existing primarily to initiate

conversions, but to support its members. This causes difficulties because of the principal measure of 'success' in this church being quantitative and focused on conversion and numerical growth, but also because of the particular understanding of Evangelicalism, with activism being secondary to conversionism, and the atonement being more prominent in the theological outlook than the incarnation. In other words, groups which appear to have a different *modus operandi* may be seen as inferior to those which clearly meet the church's aims, and may even be perceived as threatening.

However, this seemed to afford the single parents' group a level of freedom that had more in common with those in the city centre congregation. As it was largely left to operate independently, it was able to offer pastoral care and discuss immediate needs. This meant that group members, rather than just recognised leaders, were able to offer advice and support through sharing their own experiences. The nature of the group meant that it was not tied to the normal rules around gender and leadership in that church; its female leader had, for a number of years, been able to lead a mixed-gender group. Thus, the invisibility of this group within the wider congregation, and lack of official recognition, could be argued to have *benefited* it to a degree. However, it acted as a barrier to *newcomers*, who were effectively subject to the control of the 'gatekeepers', who in this case were the leaders of other small groups and the small groups' pastor. Finally, it was clear from interviews and some informal conversations that the purpose of the group was somewhat misunderstood, with many regarding it as simply providing opportunities to meet a new partner, a view possibly reinforced by the leader having met her husband there.

In both congregations, single parents were part of small groups and were clearly regarded as having a role to play in terms of pastoral care and theological education. The balance between these tasks differed between groups and congregations, and yet small groups provided a space in which negotiation between the public and the private, manifesting itself in approaches towards single parents, could occur. They were semi-public spaces in which people could share their own experiences, and thus silences could be challenged, as could the dominant discourses around single parents.

From interviews within both congregations, there appeared to be a sense that being a single parent was not the 'ideal'. Some interviewees referred to it as not being the 'biblical norm', and so not appropriate for being preached about publicly, where as others referred to it in terms of the specific 'needs' they felt single parents would have. Small groups were seen as ideal for meeting these needs. To understand where these views of single parent families not being the 'ideal' stem from, it is necessary to look beyond the church and into the secular arena of the media and politics. Ideas such as

those promulgated by Charles Murray and Melanie Phillips in the British Underclass theory are responsible for the emergence this picture of single parents, something discussed further in the literature review.¹³⁹

Here, we note that the view single parents as being in need leads to their being thought of as requiring of pastoral care more readily than theological education. This probably explains why the single parents' group in the small town church took the form it did and has continued despite not conforming to the dominant model of small groups, and the emphasis on conversionism, that sits behind this approach. In the city centre congregation, many small group members have pastoral difficulties that are regarded by wider society in a similarly negative fashion to that of single parenthood. This may explain why small groups that are not dominated by *established* members operate in a similar way. In both churches, small groups dominated by married couples were more likely to focus on theological education than pastoral care.

Involvement with Para-Church Groups and Outside Agencies

Both congregations offered their buildings to outside agencies to use as a venue, but the city centre church had more links with secular organisations and agencies. As they themselves had fewer resources than they would have liked and were based in a socially deprived area, they took the view that they would work with any organisation supporting the community in their locality. This openness may also reflect the public service ethos within the congregation, and also a decision made on the basis of having an idealistic vision but also pragmatic realism. They are aware that to fulfil their ambitions, they need to generate funding, and that the providers of such funding are typically NGOs and statutory agencies.

The pastoral issues faced by the city centre congregation have necessitated them being able to support people with legal, debt, immigration and housing problems among others, as described above. As such, they recognise that in order to fulfil this role and be effective advocates for the local community, collaboration with a range of agencies is required, leading to the benefits of being able to set appropriate boundaries and play to their own strengths, and avoid getting inappropriately involved in complex issues best handled by other agencies. However, this approach has not always been successful, and sometimes the boundaries have become blurred. Moreover, the demands on the leadership have sometimes been substantial, because they are

¹³⁹ Murray, C, et al, *Charles Murray and The Underclass: The Developing Debate*, London, IEA Welfare with The Sunday Times (1996) www.civitas.org.uk/pdf/cw33.pdf (accessed 15/6/11).

recognised as a point of call when locals need advocacy or liaison with formal agencies, such as the courts or police. It was informally mentioned to me by one of the leaders that almost on a weekly basis, her and her husband find themselves at the police station until 3:30am, supporting members of the local community whose teenagers have got into some kind of trouble.

If the work of the city centre church is viewed in terms of 'social services', then it matches the pattern identified by Chaves; congregations "which have particularly high income constituents do *fewer* social services", where as those "which are located in poor neighbourhoods but whose members are more middle than lower class", are most likely to engage in this type of work.¹⁴⁰ This may capture some of the differences between the small town church, with its more affluent congregation, and the city centre church based in a socially deprived area. Moreover, Chaves' hypothesis also states that more moderate and less conservative congregations are more likely to engage in this work, and this may be a contributing factor here. Thus, one may conclude that the nature of a church's links with outside organisations is in some ways dictated by the approach taken to outreach; greater emphasis on 'social service' may lead to a greater willingness to engage with non-Christian organisations, as well as para-church groups.

Beyond this pragmatic approach to need, there are historical denominational links that influence the approach taken. The small town congregation was previously part of a denomination which took an exclusivist, closed approach. In contrast, the city centre congregation's denomination has adopted a more open style, and has encouraged partnership and stakeholder approaches to civic involvement.

As previously described, the small town congregation has a history of using para-church organisations as resource providers, or sources of revenue through the use of buildings. Moreover, they have also been resource providers themselves to these organisations, and so this puts them in a somewhat different position to most congregations; they have sought to engage with Evangelical groups, whose focus is on conversion and church growth, both in this country and abroad.

The relationship of each church to their surrounding community was a key factor in determining the degree of congregational interaction with single parents and the engagement with para-church groups and secular organisations seeking to support them. In the city centre congregation, interaction with the local community was central

¹⁴⁰ Chaves, *Congregations in America*, p46 refers to this type of collaboration by explaining that "congregation-based social services depend on secular social service agencies..[rather] than constitute an alternative to those agencies." This relationship is very much acknowledged within the city centre congregation. This is further developed and pp52-43 relate to the geographical areas that these approaches may most be taken in.

to the growth strategy, meaning that engagement with single parents was implicitly part of that due to the demographics of the area, as well as necessitating forming links and partnerships with a range of secular, as well as religious, organisations. One such organisation is *Care for the Family*; they provide resources to help support single parents.

In the small town church, the growth strategy is instead focused on 'friendship evangelism' and courses for 'seekers', which therefore places emphasis on evangelism beyond the local community, and so its members (including a large number of single parents) may never enter onto the church's radar. Indeed, this congregation contains relatively few members from the local community. Therefore, as an organisation, the church will not necessarily have the appropriate resources to support single parents. In this situation, as has happened in the small town church, it may be left to the single parents themselves to provide the support network for others in the same position.

The more pragmatic approach of the city centre congregation, with its greater emphasis on social activism in the local community, can therefore be seen to make it more aware of and able to deal with, the diverse nature and needs of single parents. This awareness and acknowledgement of diversity came across in the comments of their leaders and established members. This contrasted with the tendency of those in the small town congregation who were not single parents to initially associate the term with 'unmarried teenage mothers'.

Attitudes to single parents

On a private level, the single parents interviewed all said that they felt supported. Individuals who had provided pastoral support were frequently mentioned; for example, in the city centre congregation, the assistant pastor was highlighted, and in the small town church, the leader of the single parents' group and small groups' pastor were notable. However, on a public level, they felt there was a lack of mention of single parents, and issues affecting them, in sermons.

This private support structure flowing from leaders (both paid and unpaid) placed sometimes heavy demands upon them, and this was particularly clear within the city centre congregation. If pastoral care in churches is only provided by those with an official role, then there is a risk of burnout occurring. Moreover, others who are not receiving support can become resentful; this was an issue in the city centre church, with congregation members feeling their needs were secondary to those of some in the local community. There was some recognition of this in both churches, but it appeared

to be a matter of ongoing concern, related to their emphasis on small groups and either the appropriate training of small group leaders or the attachment of pastoral care workers to a group. At the time of writing, both congregations appeared to be trying to develop appropriate responses to these problems and neither had come to a stage where it is possible can comment on their effectiveness or otherwise.

In this situation, it is possible that if single parents were thought of as being pastorally 'high-maintenance', then they could be resented by the wider congregation. This did not appear to be the case here, but there was mention made in one interview of those who were more independent single parents, compared to those whom, it was felt, should become more self-sufficient. These comments seemed, if put in theoretical terms, to relate to ideas put forward by Charles Murray, amongst others, that there are those in the 'underclass' who will take advantage of support, and those who will work to support themselves.

Small groups seemed to be places where pastoral needs were identified and public discussion of the needs of single parents took place, particularly during prayer time rather than through resource material, in which they were largely invisible. This means that groups containing a mixture of single parents and others were ones through which greater understanding was being generated. Single-parent-only groups fulfilled a different function of advice and support. Therefore, involvement of single parents in small groups can be seen as a positive factor, but the nature of the small group determines what role it fulfils in terms of support and information.

Another factor appearing to determine the experience of single parents was the familiarity of *established* members with them. In both churches, there were *established* members who had been single parents themselves, either through relationship breakdown or divorce, and were recognised both as being single parents and very much part of their congregations, which was noted in interviews. In one church, this happened several decades ago, and as recently as ten years ago in the other. This acceptance of individuals and their active involvement in church life was seen as evidence of their being treated and welcomed as people, and not simply stereotyped. Moreover, some were given almost heroic status because of how they had overcome problems, such as one man in the city centre congregation. Thus, it appears that the term 'single parent' was not treated as referring to a particular group in society, but instead related to given individuals known in their congregations. Interestingly, thus, despite claiming to see single parents as "just the same as anybody else", people immediately identified certain individuals with the term. It is not clear if this identification with specific people led to a more positive discourse around single parenthood, which

was reflected in interviews, or whether my being known as a single parent led interviewees to want to present their church in the most positive light.

Conclusion

The differing ways in which the city centre and small town churches measure 'successful' ministry underpins many of the differences in both their congregational lives, and the treatment of single parents in particular. The city centre congregation measure it in qualitative terms, as opposed to the quantitative measures employed by the small town congregation, and these outlooks are reflected in their theology, leadership structure, small groups and level of inclusion of single parents. A public service ethos was prevalent in the city centre congregation, and a more business-like structure in the small town congregation, and this stemmed, at least in part, from the centrality or otherwise of conversionism.

The small town church's principal focus was on bringing people, mostly through existing connections with congregation members, to have a personal faith in Jesus Christ, where as the city centre church placed more of an emphasis on the incarnation and growth in discipleship. This made it clear that one could not simply use the term 'Evangelical' about these congregations, though both satisfied the 'standard' definitions, but needed to be aware of subtleties and differences in emphasis. As such, these were actually two very different organisations.

It may be the case that while attitudes to single parents are similar in two given churches, the level of support and understanding provided may differ. That is not to say that single parents may not be experiencing the care which leads to 'qualitative' success within a church which predominantly takes a 'quantitative' approach. However, it may mean that such work goes unrecognised, and further marginalisation from the main congregation may result. While this can seem negative, it may mean, as in the small town church, that a group emerges which is able to transcend some of the dominant norms of the organisation and facilitate change (as with the female leadership of a mixed group).

Conclusions

Introduction

This research has been investigating an area neglected by both theologians and sociologists – that of single parents in Evangelical churches, in which many complex issues converge to influence their experiences. We now summarise the main results.

Representations of Single Parents

One aim of this thesis was to investigate the perceptions of single parents in Evangelical churches, and to ascertain the perspectives single parents themselves had of their churches and their place within them. A second aim was to explore the perceptions of church leaders in congregations containing single parents, and to a lesser extent other members of the congregations, had about them. A third was to explore some of the literature, to examine how some sociologists and writers in the mainstream Evangelical context viewed the experience of single parents within Evangelical churches. The overall aim can be summed up as simply wanting to explore how Evangelical congregations deal with single parenthood.

The majority of interviewees saw marriage and the nuclear family as the ideal, echoed in the sentiments of the person who explained, “I’m still an advocate for marriage, and for mums and dads and for bringing up children”, yet they also spoke of the positive aspects of their situation and what they had learnt from their experiences. The very enthusiastic response given by one person, “I love being on me own, best choice I ever made”, was not shared by most, probably because of the circumstances that led to their becoming single parents; yet, the majority did have stories that reflected strength rather than brokenness.

The ‘strength’ and ‘resilience’ of the single parents spoken to was expressed in several ways, including their ability to seek new directions in their lives following divorce. Several people explained how they had acquired jobs having not previously worked, and most of these positions were outside of the church. Another spoke of getting involved in her local residents’ association and feeling she could play an active role in her community. In her work with survivors of abuse of various kinds (which reflects the experience of some of the single parents interviewed), Barbara Glasson coined the

term “*survivre*”, which means to “live above” a story of abuse.¹⁴¹ This seems to have been the case with many of the interviewees, who were able to live above the experiences; single parenthood was not their defining characteristic.

It was illuminating to reflect on the conflict experienced by some of the non-single parent interviewees, who seemed caught between their stereotype of a single parent (from one interviewee, “the unmarried, girl that’s just gone and got pregnant”) and their actual encounters with them. While gender was not explicitly a factor, most respondents did think of single parents in terms of single mothers. However, the majority were acknowledged to be “people who had split later in life”. This dissonance was particularly apparent in the small town church; one of its leaders described how this research had “immediately challenged my stereotypes... I go away and think: there is the widow, there is the divorcee, there is the male”.

On the occasions where gender entered into the conversations, it was in respect of two male single parents, who were the principal carers for their children and who were ascribed a kind of ‘heroic’ status. This was one of three standard responses given in discussions considering male single parents. The second, which was more negative, was that of the absent partner (this was often implicit rather than explicitly articulated); the assumption was that primary carers are female and they are left with this responsibility as a result of the actions of men.¹⁴² The third response concerned their apparent invisibility. One leader in the small town congregation commented that this study had made him realise that men were single parents too. Another leader, this time from the city centre church, felt strongly that, particularly in matriarchal communities, men needed specific support because they were becoming marginalised and lacked appropriate role models. The heroic status ascribed to one single father by an interviewee resulted from her sense that his parenting role went unacknowledged.

There are similarities here with findings emerging from disability studies concerning visibility, where the disabled are either portrayed as heroic or face invisibility; this may be an area of research which could help the understanding of the representation of single fathers.¹⁴³ There are also possible comparisons that could be drawn between the invisibility of single fathers and male victims of domestic violence. In both cases, there

¹⁴¹ Glasson, B, *A Spirituality of Survival: Enabling a Response to Trauma and Abuse*, London, Continuum, (2009).

¹⁴² An example of this view of single fathers is David Cameron’s comments on single fathers without caring responsibilities in <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/david-cameron/8584238/David-Cameron-Dads-gift-to-me-was-his-optimism.html> (accessed 29/6/11).

¹⁴³ Barnes, C, Mercer, G, and Shakespeare, T, *Exploring Disability A Sociological Introduction*, Cambridge, Polity, (2003) would be an appropriate introductory text to use to begin to identify the similarities and differences between the representations of the disabled and the single parent father.

is evidence of gendered responses by official bodies and these being causes taken up by feminists, because the majority of those affected are women.

Small Groups as Transformational Spaces

The benefits received by single parents as a result of participation in small groups are not easily quantifiable. The interviews suggested that this related primarily to emotional support and advice on various life issues. For example, members of the single parents' group in the small town church commented that it was helpful to share with others who had gone through, or were going through, the same types of experience. One interviewee described the main benefit to her: "[I] was going to be with people who had gone through or were going through exactly the same as me, with kids". Another described the support given by the group in the following way: "It was all stages... everybody bounces off each other and you're able to relate to them by saying 'that happened to me, but then what I did was this' or 'yes you'll probably feel this next, this is the next step'".

When the focus of the groups was purely on conversion and discipleship, measured by service in the church, the benefits of small groups to single parents could become less visible. The reasons for this are twofold: firstly, the qualitative benefits are being ignored; secondly, the caring responsibilities of single parents could exclude them from certain types of service. However, when the focus went beyond conversionism (while not excluding it), there was more scope for single parents and other marginalised or minority groups to be positively helped by these groups. In both congregations, the benefits of the latter approach were emphasised by those who had attended *Alpha* alongside being connected to the church in some other way. For these people, *Alpha* had been part of the way they had been supported through the transformative process. However, that was not sufficient in of itself, and a more holistic approach was vital.

In both of the congregations, small groups were seen as transformational spaces. However, the nature of the space and the type of transformation being encouraged differed between groups. In the small town congregation, the emphasis was on transformation through conversion. The activities and discussions in the small groups were geared towards this end, with the focus shifting to theological education for those who had already had a conversion experience. Potential new members of the church were invited to *Alpha* courses in order to achieve this conversion, with *Christianity Explored* following this up. These courses formed the small groups available to *newcomers*, with others for *established* members being held separately; this approach

reflected the measurement of 'success' using *quantitative* means. Pastoral issues could be raised, but were dealt with outside of the formal bible study period.

The one exception was the single parents' group, where the transformation which was being supported related to the transitional process of becoming a single parent. While there was an issue in terms of *newcomer* members of the church being signposted to the group, it contained a mix of both *established* and *newcomer* members. One member described the group's activities as follows: "I think it was a group where it was more of a social event, getting to know one another ... taking a while to share certain things in a group... We wouldn't dip into scriptures, but we would talk about Jesus and what's happened within the week... and difficulties and we'd have a prayer time at the end. There was total trust there, everything was kept within the group".

Part of the transformative process for single parents involves the willingness, or ability, to trust others and enter into intimate relationships again. The single parents' group in the small town church appeared to help people to do this, and indeed the leader, having met and married her new husband, continued to lead the group. This, together with the fact that majority of the group were "people who had split later in life and were now single parents", led to its image in the wider congregation as simply being a match-making opportunity. This was made clear through several informal comments made throughout the course of this study, and indicates that the qualitative benefits of the group went largely unrecognised.

The small groups in the city centre congregation can also be seen as transformative spaces, but ones which acted in a very different way. They contained a mixture of *newcomers* and *established* members as a matter of course, and often set aside their bible studies in order to facilitate the transformation of people's physical, as well as spiritual, lives. This reflected the more *qualitative* understanding of what constitutes 'success'. The problems faced by members included issues such as housing, asylum applications, unemployment, health problems and the bullying of children. These were discussed within the groups, with the aim of supporting the individual and offering advice which could transform their lives. One interviewee, a single parent, commented that "they don't try and rush forward with the work they're trying to do if someone needs some wrap-around care from the groups, and quite often your study can be put aside to realise the immediate".

Historic Influences and Change

As numerous theorists have outlined, different ecclesiologies are being adopted by congregations seeking to respond to secularisation. The changes enacted by churches vary according to their traditions and willingness to step outside their comfort zones; their level of openness to a transformational process is key. Some congregations continue to focus on formal meetings and forming particular groups in order to facilitate evangelism, while others have a more fluid and informal structure. Theological education is likely to be seen as imperative in the former and pastoral care in the latter.

This research indicates that where congregations have gone through major transformational processes themselves, they are more likely to empathise with aspects of what single parents experience, in terms of handling loss and change. That is not to say tensions do not exist, but going through a transformational process appears to forge a stronger bond between those who remain. Such churches are more likely to be welcoming of single parents, because they are not only engaging with para-church groups seeking to defend against erosion of ‘traditional values’, but also with NGOs with a range of policies relating to equality and inclusion.

In the small town congregation, the historical influence of the Brethren denomination was still clearly important, particularly for its *established* members. This legacy was most obviously apparent in relation to leadership and gender roles, though one must note that this appeared to reflect the views of some *newcomer*, as well as *established*, church members. Women were not allowed to be involved in public leadership of adult work, but instead took part in catering, administrative, women’s and children’s work; men participated in public leadership and practical maintenance tasks. This was reinforced by teaching material on male headship, including a *Visionary Purpose* parenting course, run during the research period, which explicitly addressed this issue; it said that the above was God’s intention for family life. The course website said:

“Biblical fatherhood and motherhood are under attack. Husbands, what does it mean to love, serve, and lead our wives? What does it mean to be a spiritual leader? Wives, what does it mean to help and respect our husbands? What does it mean to reclaim the nobility of motherhood?”¹⁴⁴

The dominant model of family found in this congregation was the 1950s model. Penny Long Marler, Penny Edgell and others have identified this as being the era in which many churches formed their theology.¹⁴⁵ The model thus originates from a time when the level of single parenthood was lower, and the primary route into it was still through

¹⁴⁴ <http://visionaryfam.com/families/> (accessed 3/9/11).

¹⁴⁵ Again see Edgell, P, *Rhetoric and Practice: Defining “Good Family” in Local Congregation* and Marler, P, *Lost in the Fifties* for a full discussion of the 1950’s schema of family being used.

being widowed. The small town congregation operated through this lens for various reasons.

There are a number of extended families attending the church and involved in leadership positions, particularly among *established* members. In these families, and to a lesser extent the *newcomer* families, the dominant model was that either the woman did not work, or she worked part-time, while the male remained the primary wage-earner. The model of evangelism employed by the church centred on inviting friends and family to events and courses, leading to extended families attending among the *newcomers* as well. The level of graduates was, according to anecdotal evidence, relatively low for a congregation of its size, potentially leading to a lower level of geographical mobility. This being a 'gathered' congregation, with members attending from across the region, made it easier for extended families to attend.

Additionally and significantly, the church has been heavily influenced by the thought and work of American mega-church pastors such as Billy Hybels (Willow Creek) and Rick Warren (the *Purpose-Driven* series). Thus, changes implemented in the move from being a Brethren to a 'free Evangelical' congregation included the appointment of a pastor (and later a team of pastors), the introduction of technology and newer worship styles into services, and a move to 'seeker-friendly' events and courses being heavily promoted. In other words, the changes influenced the *practice* of the congregation far more than its *underlying values*. Moreover, these models of church structure still reflect a theological and hegemonic outlook which assumes the 1950s view of family as the Christian ideal.¹⁴⁶

Now, in the model of church that emerges from the combination of the above, single parents are regarded as 'seekers' but their families do not reflect 'biblical norms'. Thus, when such congregations plan their evangelism strategies, seeking to invite those with whom members are already in contact, single parents are not naturally part of the resulting 'target market'. Moreover, in a situation where secularisation is seen as 'attacking' biblical notions of parenthood and family, resource providers are more likely to be selected from para-church organisations who are similarly involved in defending these ideas. The cumulative effect of all this is that there was a closer correlation to the 1950s model of family in this congregation than is often the case.

The city centre congregation had undergone change during the late twentieth century as well, partly in response to increased secularisation. To some extent, this was also

¹⁴⁶ This model of family is largely outlined in this article which was published in the 1940's: Parsons, T, *Age and Sex in the Social Structure of the United States*, American Sociological Review, Vol. 7, No. 5 (Oct., 1942), pp. 604-616.

influenced by the American mega-church model, but there was a reaction against this within the church. Thus, the congregation was affiliated to Willow Creek Britain and Ireland, and had studied both *The Purpose Driven Church* and *The Purpose Driven Life*, but had undergone a different type of organisational transformation. This had been influenced by the charismatic movement in the late 1980s, and by the 'Action in Mission' initiative launched by the Baptist Union around the same time. They had therefore begun actively working with, and using resources from, non-Christian NGOs as well as para-church organisations.

This congregation has increased its staff, but with the purpose of doing more work with those outside the church building, such as "reaching children in the local community". As the community in which they were located included a number of single parent families, the strategy they embraced in light of increased secularisation necessitated engaging with them. In order to connect with this group and others such as asylum seekers, it was recognised that a move away from a 1950s family model was required. A 'Family Centre' was launched in 2002, and over time, as the notion of 'what is church?' broadened, it was noted that "in essence, the [family centre] and the church were one and the same thing".¹⁴⁷

The *structure* of church life has not changed in the city centre congregation, but rather the *underlying values* and ecclesiology have fundamentally shifted. This change in emphasis has meant that some aspects of church life have become much more informal. In these situations, the changing nature of family is something which is not actively preached against or discouraged, but rather, different types of family are seen as needing to be actively supported.

Additionally, first-hand experience of contact with single parents led to greater understanding. In the city centre church, an elderly member of the congregation had been a single parent and heavily involved in church life, including as a Sunday School teacher. Interaction with her helped those in that church to move away from seeing single parenthood as a threatening product of secularisation.

¹⁴⁷ See Lidgate, B, *Living Stones*, pp 40 -44 for a full description of how the city centre church developed its work to further develop links with families in the local community.

Opportunities for Single Parents

The majority of single parents were women (though the experience of men should not be further neglected due to invisibility) and so the leadership opportunities available for single parents in churches depend, to a large extent, on the opportunities available for women. This is an area in which there is variation among Evangelical congregations.

In the small town congregation, women were not officially allowed to undertake leadership positions. Thus, the majority of single parents were not stopped from engaging in leadership opportunities due to their status, but rather as a result of their gender. As a consequence of this, the leader of the single parents' group was in a unique position, being the female leader of a mixed-gender group. When she remarried, her husband became the co-leader with her. By contrast, in the city centre congregation, where men and women were equally encouraged to take up leadership positions, single parents were involved at various levels, including as part of the diaconate. Consequently, attitudes to gender, rather than marital status, governed the level of leadership opportunity in the churches.

In both congregations, the opportunities for service that did not involve leadership responsibility seemed to depend upon length of time in the congregation and level of religious commitment. The range of activities engaged in by interviewees included being part of the worship group, helping lead a small group sometimes, stewarding on the car-park at church events, providing transport to youth events, being a Scout leader, being a member of the local residents association, providing food to the congregation, helping set chairs and tables out, providing transport for an elderly member of the congregation, helping with luncheon club, helping with a kids club, being a cleaner and receptionist. This was all in addition to the paid work which many of the interviewees had, and illustrates the fact that single parents make similar contributions to other members, particularly in terms of 'non-leadership' roles and activities. Note that childcare did not seem to be an issue in either church.

In conclusion, the level of participation of single parents in Evangelical churches is higher than one may initially think likely. However, they were more likely to have lower profile roles and participate in weekday events, with the consequence that the visibility of their involvement is low. This added to their invisibility in discussions on family during formal Sunday worship, which could create the impression that they are less-valued members of their congregations. Despite this, the nature of their involvement, which mirrors that of others, is a possible explanation for why the single parents interviewed did not feel they were negatively treated, and other congregation members did not feel they were treated differently.

Visibility and Representation of Single Parents

The issue of the visibility of single parents in the congregations' main meetings, and the recognition of the contribution, is explored here in depth because it ties into the above issues, as well as other, wider theological questions.

Apart from one person in the small town congregation, none of the interviewees could recall single parenthood being directly mentioned in church; moreover, there was no mention of biblical figures as single mothers in the sermons heard while conducting this research; the pastors confirmed that they had not preached on this issue. When 'family' was mentioned in the city centre congregation, it either took a loose and unspecified form, or was related to the church as family. In the small town congregation, the nuclear family was proclaimed as the ideal; on occasion, issues of divorce and remarriage were explored in preaching, but in language that reinforced the 'traditional' model. Thus, in the public worship of the two congregations, there was no acknowledgement of single parents, thus rendering them an invisible category of people.

This was almost certainly not unique to these churches; indeed, within the white-majority churches that use the lectionary, the story of Hagar and Ishmael is not preached. As Dolores S. Williams explains in her essay on '*Hagar in African-American Biblical Appropriation*', this is not the case in black-majority congregations, where Hagar has become a revered figure.¹⁴⁸ As the numbers of single parents are much higher in Afro-Caribbean communities in England and Wales, it is not possible to comment upon whether this invisibility of single parents occurs only in white-majority congregations. This would be an area for further research.

It is unclear as to whether this invisibility is intentional, or stems from the fact that most church leaders have never themselves experienced single parenthood. While the homogeneity of church leaders as married men is beginning to change (one of the small town congregation leaders was the father in a reconstituted family), it is still the norm. Moreover, as has already been noted, single parents, by virtue of the gender balance, did not tend to be involved in leading public worship. By contrast, single parents were more visible in small group settings, and as we have seen, these have the potential to act as transformative spaces. This occurred in various ways.

¹⁴⁸ Williams, D, *Hagar in African American Biblical Appropriation* (within Trible, P, and Russell, L, (eds) *Hagar, Sarah and their Children, Jewish, Christian and Muslim Perspectives*, Westminster, John Knox Press, (2006) – in informal conversation with women in English black-majority churches I understand Hagar also has a high standing.

In the small town congregation, the small groups' pastor became more aware of the presence of single parents when considering when it would be convenient for a single parent with a part-time evening job (whose child was quite young) to attend a *Christianity Explored* course. Additionally, they have a small group specifically for single parents, although it was argued by some interviewees that the group was not given the same status as others.

In both congregations, small group participants were encouraged to reflect upon their own experiences and to ask for prayer at the end of the meeting if they had a particular concern. Interviewees indicated that this provided an opportunity for them to share, and to receive emotional support. This was easier in the single parents' group in the small town congregation and in the city centre church generally, due to conversion and/or theological education not forming the primary emphasis in group meetings.

Small groups can also provide spaces in which dialogue and discussion can take place, and the interface between the 'private' and 'public' can be explored. Penny Edgell describes small groups as the places where spoken messages, which she refers to as "rhetoric", and pastoral care and "practice" elements of church life, intersect.¹⁴⁹ This means that they provide spaces in which the formal teaching of the churches on family can be considered against the backdrop of the realities of experience. Unless the group comprises only single parents, such reflection on contemporary family life and the nature of change can be shared by others.

For example, in addition to the sharing of experience by asylum seekers and single parents in the city centre congregation, *established* church members were observed talking about their wider families and the difficulties they were facing. An informal conversation with one *established* couple in this church revealed that they had thought quite deeply about the way models of contemporary family did not match those discussed within formal worship because of their experiences of children who were co-habiting. Reference to these experiences is unlikely to be made within public worship, but may well be referred to within small group situations.

Another consequence of the lack of visibility relates to their numbers and consequent recognition within congregations. It is difficult to determine the total number of single parents in churches. While research, such as the church census data, has shown that single parents are under-represented, their lack of visibility and recognition may serve to exaggerate the impression that they are not numerous in churches. This could particularly impact upon single fathers, and even more so those without the main care of their children, as they face an increased level of marginalisation and invisibility. They

¹⁴⁹ See Edgell, P, *Religion and Family in A Changing Society*, P94 for a discussion on this.

are likely not to be counted by their churches, as they are not necessarily recognised as single parents.

This again raises questions for further research: what is the actual level of attendance by single parents (including non-resident fathers) in our congregations and why are single parents unrepresented? There is also scope for research of a more theological nature, into why single parent narratives are excluded from the lectionary and whether this omission is a cause of invisibility of single parents in main services.

Findings on the Experiences of Single Parents

The single parents spoke to within this study overwhelmingly viewed their overall experiences in these two congregations as positive. However, the majority also viewed their congregations as exceptional and as containing particular individuals who had contributed to their positive experience. It appeared that their relationships within the congregation, and the presence of individuals in leadership positions who they viewed as advocates or sources of support, were of particular importance. These relationships were often developed or strengthened through small group situations.

In the small town church, where the discreet single parent group existed, the key leader identified as providing this advocacy and support role was most commonly named as the leader of the single parent group. While the senior leadership was generally positively spoken of, there was a sense in which their experience of the single parent group was separated from their experience of the main congregation. For example, one interviewee described the small group as her “lifeline” but described the loneliness she had sometimes felt during the main Sunday services, due to the size of the congregation. Another explained she now rarely attended the main services, but was still a part of the small group, largely because of the friendship she had formed with the group leader. A third interviewee from this congregation spoke of the wider loneliness he had felt as a single parent, and how the leader of the group had contacted him regularly to check how he was, as she understood this. He explained how times like Mother’s Day and Father’s Day were hard for him, as the main services would focus on the parenting role in traditional terms.

In the city centre congregation, the source of support and advocacy most frequently named by the interviewees was the assistant pastor. Several of the single parents spoke of their experience using language of family. One said, “We have our little family links. So it does feel like a family, and although I come from a big family, the family I’ve never had.” Another single parent interviewee said, “The church is my family, definitely.”

For these people, the diversity of the congregation was important to them. While they frequently focused on the role small groups or individual people in the church had played in their experience, they did not differentiate between their experience in the small group situation and the wider congregation.

Overall Conclusions

As explained during the methodology section, this study has only focused on two congregations and so cannot be argued to be representative of the experience of single parents in all Evangelical churches. However, as also explained it is a comparative study where a ranged of key concepts have been explored. These include features which are identifiable in different Evangelical churches, and which can be argued to impact experience in an identifiable way. For example, attitudes towards women in leadership will invariably impact the likely visibility of single parents within the leadership of a congregation. The organisation of small groups and the focus taken within them is also going to be an identifiable feature from which conclusions can be drawn regarding the likely experience of single parents. Thus, the conclusions reached are more broadly applicable.

Single parents can struggle to be visible in formal church settings involving the whole congregation, such as in Sunday services, and particularly services such as those on Mothering Sunday, which focus on traditional understandings of parenting. While they are not seeking specific recognition during principal services, they are keen for their contributions to church life to be recognised, while having an understanding expressed that they face specific issues in their lives. While recognition appears to be greater in small groups, invisibility was an issue in wider congregational settings. The reasons for this are complex and linked to a range of issues.

Firstly, if the leadership is gender-segregated, then the disproportionate likelihood of single parents to be female means that they are automatically less likely to be visible. Secondly, the dominant biblical narratives used in Evangelical and other white-majority churches tend to ignore material relating to the single parent experience. There is effort made to reinforce the notion of the nuclear family as the ideal and norm. Finally, single parenthood is not immediately obvious in the way that belonging to an ethnic minority is, for example. This combination of factors works together to ensure that single parents are invisible, and that single fathers are particularly marginalised.

Small groups which focus on pastoral care and mutual support (either exclusively for single parents or more generally for their members) are transitional spaces where

single parents can be pastorally supported but also become visible. This is more likely to occur in congregations and situations where the primary role of the small group is not seen as facilitating a conversion experience or providing theological education. There appeared to be a lack of recognition given to the contribution single parents are making within Evangelical congregations.

Evangelical churches which respond to secularisation in ways which are perhaps best typified by the Fresh Expressions approach, which requires them to reconsider their ecclesiology, are best able to incorporate single parents into their thinking and organisational structures.¹⁵⁰ This can happen because they have often begun to depart from a 1950s model of church, which Edgell and others have highlighted as increasingly inappropriate for engaging with modern family structures. Such congregations are more likely to want to engage directly with those living in their locality. Where these communities contain single parents, this approach automatically means that single parents become part of the 'target market' and strategic thinking of the church. This can be further developed, as these congregations are more likely to be working alongside secular resource providers and NGOs, as well as Christian para-church organisations.

Evangelical churches who respond to secularisation by embracing the American mega-church approach are likely to be more focused on conversion as their main task. This may lead to a division between *established* and *newcomer* members, which is unhelpful when seeking to provide transitional spaces to support single parents in this aspect of their lives. The cultural underpinning of these conservative American approaches to church could potentially make them more defensive and less pragmatic in their approach to different forms of family life. Consequently, single parents are not likely to be seen as a 'target market' for evangelism. Moreover, such churches are less likely to network with resource providers who are not Christian para-church organisations, and so this may restrict their knowledge of, and ability to proactively engage with, single parents.

In churches where success is *quantitatively* based and focused upon conversion, the experience of single parents is not likely to be as highly valued as in those who take a more *qualitative* approach. This may lead single parents to form their own groups, which take an approach which is more akin to more general small group experiences in congregations where success is measured *qualitatively*. The hallmark of these groups

¹⁵⁰ <http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/> (accessed 4/9/11) outlines this type of approach. They run the MSM course which the city centre congregation were engaged with.

is likely to be a higher level of informality and a greater willingness to engage in pastoral care support in meetings, as opposed to quietly afterwards.

Appendix I – Recommendations

The recommendations which follow primarily relate to the experience of single parents within Evangelical churches, but may be equally applicable to congregations which prefer to regard themselves as Mainstream or Liberal:

- The visibility of single parents in whole church settings is, it appears, largely non-existent. Ways to remedy this may include using biblical passages such as the story of Hagar and Ishmael to discuss the experience of single parents.
- Where possible, single parents should be integrated into small groups which focus on pastoral care support, as well as seeking to facilitate conversion or simply provide theological education. This may or may not involve the formation of groups specifically for single parents, but it will almost certainly involve the mixing of *established* and *newcomer* members of the church.
- Congregations need to move away from the images they have of single parents and to recognise that they are a diverse group. In particular, it means recognising the experience of male single parents, including those who do not have main caring responsibilities for their children. This will involve moving away from gendered expectations of childcare and segregated conjugal roles. Rather, there is a need to embrace an understanding of single parents as going through a transitional experience.
- Congregations often have single parents volunteering and serving within them. If this contribution were recognised, it may help those who are not single parents to reflect on the diverse experience of single parents and the contributions they have to make to society. This in turn helps to counter many of the negative media representations of single parents. In doing this, there are lessons to be learnt from disability studies, in terms of not turning the single parent volunteer into the hero.
- The study of single parents and their experience has been largely unexplored in the Sociology of Religion and in Theology, certainly within white-majority churches. This means that there is a huge potential area for study, which would benefit both the academy and faith communities.

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