

ABSTRACT

YOUNGER PLANTING: BEST PRACTICE FOR PLANTING CHURCHES THAT REACH YOUNG ADULTS

by

Benjamin Doolan

The Church of England has seen a recent increase in resource allocation towards church planting, particularly with an emphasis on reaching young adults, as this is the people group the church is least likely to engage with now. This increased focus on church planting, accompanied by a growing normalization of church planting language, practices, and culture within the Church, has necessitated research into the characteristics of churches and church plants that effectively engage young adults. This research aims to investigate the specific ministry practices employed by such churches and church plants.

This research's purpose was to look at several churches identified as places of best practice when reaching young adults. Six denominational leaders were surveyed which led to a number of churches being identified by the researcher. Of these churches, six were invited to participate in the research. Thirty-four young adults from these churches took part in focus groups, and the senior leaders of these churches and church plants were interviewed.

The findings of this research are that church planting does work as a way to reach young adults and that a focus on leadership empowerment of young adults, theological clarity, and practices of prayer, intentional community creation and evangelism help churches and new church plants reach young adults

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by

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CHAPTER 1

NATURE OF THE PROJECT

Overview of the Chapter

Chapter One provides the framework for identifying best practices for reaching young adults with new Church Plants in the North East of England. The researcher provides a rationale for the project, supported by personal experience. Themes for and significant contributors to the literature review are identified, as well as contextual factors of the ministry setting. Included in Chapter One are the purpose statement, research questions for the project, research and participant descriptions, as well as methods for data collection and analysis. The researcher concludes with a preview of the entire project by chapter.

Personal Introduction

My experience as an ordained minister in the Church of England during the past decade underscores a critical challenge the church is facing: engaging with young adults. This resonates with the national picture across denominations, highlighting a concerning disconnect between the Church and this demographic. Five years ago, I planted a church in Newcastle, a city full of young adults and yet very few of them go to church. This exemplifies this very challenge and highlights the need for strategic approaches to reach them which will involve church planting. I want to discover what best practice looks like.

Newcastle, with its very young population (compared to the national average) and high concentration of students, is a reality check to the Church of England. In the

diocese, there are just 7,300 regular church attenders from a population of 800,000 (Church of England Statistics for Mission). A very small percentage of those attending church in the diocese are young adults. This mirrors the national situation.

Historically, however, the region has witnessed vibrant Christian communities. Lindisfarne, known as the “Cradle of English Christianity,” served as a springboard for sending missionaries across the north. Newcastle itself has experienced periods of spiritual renewal, exemplified by the 19th-century revival at St. Thomas’ (the church I planted into and now lead).

This rich history compels us to rediscover effective methods for church planting in the contemporary context. Notably, the Church of England’s “Resource Churches” initiative offers promising results. Many of these churches, including St Thomas’ Newcastle, have significantly younger demographics compared to traditional Church of England congregations. As Ric Thorpe, Bishop for Church Planting, notes, these churches have become an “extraordinary story” (48). These ‘Resource Churches’ are churches that are planted to further plant more churches to reach people the Church of England is not currently reaching. Further evidence along these lines comes from Ed Setzer, who observes a higher average attendance in young church plants compared to the established ones (142). On the back of this, leading practitioners in England like Christian Selvaratnam acknowledge the integral role of church planting so much so that planting has become “an integral part of the strategic plans of most dioceses” (Selvaratnam 3).

Selvaratnam has been one of the leading voices in the church reminding us that

starting and planting new churches is a rediscovery of our apostolic heritage. He goes as far as to argue that it is now “essential that every church leader...should be able...to plant a church” (Selvaratnam 3). Therefore, drawing upon both current initiatives and biblical and historical precedents, this research aims to identify best practices for planting churches that effectively engage and reach the “missing generation” of young adults. Building upon Selvaratnam’s call to rediscover our apostolic heritage, this research asks the question: how can we leverage best practices to establish churches that bridge the gap with young adults? This issue is particularly evident in my own diocese, where, prior to the planting of St. Thomas’ as a Resource Church, I was told by my Bishop that the Church of England had not witnessed any vocational ministry emerging from the local student population for over a decade. This aim to plant more churches aligns with the Church of England’s ambitious goal of planting “10,000 new Christian communities” (Church of England). By addressing critical questions about how to plant churches that will reach young adults with the good news of Jesus, we may be able to, with the power of God, turn the national picture around.

Statement of the Problem

Several recent studies and reports have highlighted the generational crisis facing the Church of England characterized by dwindling attendance figures and a disproportionately aging demographic. This phenomenon is further compounded by the geographical concentration of young Christian adults in urban centers like London, Manchester, Newcastle and others. The consequences of this demographic shift are

far-reaching as aging congregations often lack the necessary energy and resources for active outreach.

In response to this critical challenge, the Church of England has allocated significant financial resources towards new initiatives and church planting endeavors specifically aimed at engaging young adults. This strategic shift towards complementing existing church structures with new models has been advocated for by scholars and practitioners for several years. Notably, Graham Cray, in 2004, emphasized the imperative for a “mixed economy” of church models if the Church of England is to fulfill its mission effectively. This mixed-model approach is now being implemented, with new churches existing alongside inherited forms of church. This research seeks to draw upon examples of best practice to identify and elucidate effective strategies for engaging young adults when planting a church, although it is hoped both established church structures will benefit from the findings as much as newly planted congregations. By researching the practices of churches that have reached young adults, we aim to glean valuable insights and formulate actionable recommendations that can contribute to a more vibrant and younger Church of England.

Purpose of the Project

The purpose of this research was to identify best practices for planting churches that reach young adults with the Gospel by consulting literature, historic and present, current clergy in the Church of England, and young adults active in Anglican churches.

Research Questions

Research Question #1

What is the Church of England doing currently that is effective (or not) in reaching young adults?

Research Question #2

What do leaders in the Church of England and young adults attending these churches identify as primary challenges to reaching young adults with the gospel?

Research Question #3

What are best practices from new church plants in the Church of England to reach young adults?

Rationale for the Project

This research project explores the critical topic of church planting to reach young adults within the context of the Church of England. Given the well-documented decline in church attendance over the past several decades, particularly within the Church of England, as evidenced by Statista's report on the 228,000 attendance decrease between 2009 and 2021, exploring new strategies to revitalize the Church so that we can grow and reach people with the good news of Jesus becomes imperatively important. This study is driven by the conviction that planting new churches specifically geared towards reaching young adults holds significant potential in achieving this objective.

Beyond the numerical decline, a deeper motivation for church planting lies in fulfilling the Great Commission. As John McGinley aptly states in *The Church of Tomorrow*, “The Church you are a member of was planted once” (110). This sentiment echoes the Archbishop of York’s observation, “Every church was planted once.” By actively engaging in church planting, we reaffirm our commitment to this fundamental calling that has been given to us by Jesus.

Tim Keller, in his work “Why Plant Churches?” asserts that “New churches best reach the unchurched...” and emphasizes that “the only broad-scale way to bring many new Christians into the body of Christ in a permanent way is to plant new churches” (Keller, ‘Why Plant Churches?’). This assertion resonates with the historical success of church planting in the North of England, where, in the early history of Christian Britain, church planting helped enable the initial spread of Christianity around the nation. Many newly planted churches today are attracting significant numbers of young adults, many of whom have never been in the church before. Examining the effectiveness of these church plants in reaching young adults forms the focus of this research project.

If church planting is one of the ways the Church of England is going to reach new people with the gospel, and we need to do that quickly, we must plant the right kind of churches that are going to reach the people we are hoping to reach. Stefan Paas, in his work *Planting Churches in a Secular Context*, emphasizes the crucial question: “what kind of churches” are we planting (5.3.3)? This project aims to leverage insights from both historical and contemporary contexts to identify

characteristics of churches that demonstrably succeed in reaching young people and integrating them into Christian communities.

Definition of Key Terms

Church

In this research “church” is defined using the Anglican definition of church as found in the 39 Articles of Religion: “The visible Church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men, in the which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments be duly ministered according to Christ’s ordinance in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same.” In other words, the church is a physical gathering of believers that sit under the authority of God’s word and who celebrate the sacraments together.

Church Plant

In this research a “church plant” is defined by a statement called “Church Planting and the Mission of the Church” by the House of Bishops in the Church of England. They stated that “...church plants can include entirely new church communities, or fresh expressions of church, or new congregations within existing church communities. The concept of church ‘planting’ can also include initiatives to revitalize existing churches through ‘grafting’ leadership, people and/or resources into them. We encourage and commend all such initiatives” (House of Bishops). It will also take into account that a church plant can only be counted as a church if it meets the criteria set out in Article 19 in the Anglican Communion’s 39 Articles of Religion.

Young Adult

Every culture and denomination may set different age parameters for what is considered a ‘young adult’. For the purpose of this study a Young Adult is someone aged between 18 and 35.

Delimitations

Only churches in the Church of England were included in the research. The churches were included were ones in contexts where a particular ministry to Young Adults and/or Students is recognized. The new church plants were churches that have been planted in the last ten years in the Church of England. These churches were identified by key denominational leaders.

Review of Relevant Literature

This research project undertook a comprehensive literature review to examine best practices in church planting, both historic and contemporary, with the aim of gathering insights for planting churches that effectively reach young adults. The review encompassed various perspectives, including theological foundations, historical context, missiological insights, and strategies for engaging young adults.

The review commenced with a critical examination of scripture, acknowledging the strong theological underpinnings of church planting evident throughout the biblical narrative. This exploration established the theological foundations upon which effective church planting could be built.

Given the evolving terminology surrounding church planting throughout history, the review delved into the works of leading missiologists and early church

scholars. These included figures such as Roland Allen, David Bosch, Michael Goheen, Walter Kaiser, Lucien Legrand, Stuart Murray, Stefan Paas, John Stott, and Christopher Wright. Their insights provided valuable historical context and missiological principles crucial for understanding church planting within its broader historical and theological framework.

Recognizing the specific target audience of young adults, the review also incorporated the perspectives of authors who have contributed meaningfully to the understanding of contemporary youth culture and its engagement with the gospel and the church. This category included authors like Glenn Packiam and Winfield Bevins, whose works focused on specific practices within the church context. Additionally, the review included researchers specializing in the current generation of young adults (Gen Z), such as Mark DeVries, Scott Pointer, and James Emery White. To gain a more comprehensive understanding of young adults, the review even ventured into non-church settings, examining the works of Jeff Fromm and Angie Read, who offer insights from a secular marketing perspective. Beth Seversen's contribution proved particularly insightful, identifying common themes and practices employed by thriving churches in their efforts to reach young adults.

Finally, acknowledging the specific context of the Church of England, the review included the perspectives of Paul Weston and Dave Male, who have addressed contemporary developments concerning mission and new expressions of church within the Church of England itself.

Through this literature review, the research project established a foundation for investigating the most effective practices in church planting for reaching young adults within the specific context of the Church of England.

Research Methodology

This study utilized qualitative research methods to investigate the strategies employed by new church plants in the Church of England that have been successful in engaging young adults. Initially, a questionnaire was sent to six denominational leaders to obtain data on the approaches that are currently effective or ineffective in reaching young adults in the Church of England. To further supplement this data, focus groups were conducted with both young adult leaders and young adults from various churches to obtain their perspectives on the most effective strategies that their churches have employed to engage with young adults. Finally, interviews were conducted with the leaders of these successful churches to gather their insights on the factors that have contributed to their success in reaching young adults and students. The resulting data was analyzed to identify and develop what can be regarded as “best practices”.

Type of Research

This research was conducted as a qualitative pre-intervention study to identify the challenges, opportunities and best practices for those who are engaged in planting churches in the Church of England with a specific emphasis on reaching young adults through the gospel message of Jesus. Three different research instruments were used

so that data could be triangulated and ensure robustness and validity of the findings.

The survey questionnaire, focus groups, and semi-structured interviews were designed based on a review of the relevant literature and the researcher's own experience in church planting within the young adult demographic.

Participants

This study centered on six church plants (or resource churches) in the Church of England recognized by denominational leaders for their successful engagement with young adults. The decision to focus on Anglican churches was made based on the distinctive operational methods and agreed ecclesiology of the Church of England. Also, considerable funding has been allocated by the Church of England to support planting churches aimed at reaching a younger demographic. That considerable resource is being spent on this highlights the importance of identifying best practices in this area. The selection of these churches was further guided by a geographic dispersion to ensure a representative cross-section of the entire denomination. The young adults, young adult leaders and senior leaders of these churches were the human participants of this study.

Instrumentation

Data was collected through three research instruments, commencing with a survey questionnaire sent to six denominational leaders, followed by focus groups involving young adults and young adult leaders from six selected churches, culminating in semi-structured interviews with the leaders of the aforementioned

churches. By employing a consistent set of questions at each stage, this research approach facilitated methodological coding and triangulation of data. The entire data collection process spanned a two-month period.

Data Collection

This research project collected data to answer the research questions in three main ways. First, a survey was distributed to denominational leaders within the Church of England. This survey aimed to identify churches within the denomination that were demonstrably successful in reaching young adults. The survey instrument was designed to gather valuable insights into what denominational leaders regard as best practice for planting churches. The denominational leaders were also asked to highlight church plants they knew of that were recognized as reaching large numbers of young adults through their mission and ministry. This helped to select the churches for later parts of the research.

To ensure the voices of young adults were directly incorporated into the research, focus groups were conducted. These focus groups included Young Adult Leaders, people who were identified by their church leader as being the leader of young adult ministry within their churches. Their perspectives provided valuable insights into the needs, preferences, and engagement patterns of young adults within church settings.

The focus groups mainly consisted of young adults who actively participated in the life of the church plants that were identified as exhibiting best practice within the Church of England. Their participation facilitated a deeper understanding of their lived

experiences within church communities, how they or their friends came to faith, and their perspectives on factors influencing young adults engagement with the church.

To gain an in-depth understanding of the practices employed by churches identified as embodying best practices, semi-structured interviews were conducted with their leaders. These were usually the people who had planted the church. These interviews allowed for a focused exploration of specific strategies, challenges, and successes encountered by these churches in reaching young adults. By engaging in open-ended dialogue, the research project was able to explore the nuances of their practices and gain a richer understanding of their experiences. Common examples of best practice would be able to be identified through these interviews.

Data Analysis

The research data was analyzed several times to notice trends and similarities in themes. In his book *Qualitative Research*, Tim Sensing offers a method for “triangulating the data” that is collected in this type of research (197). He suggests that one “way to organize the data is to discuss the areas of significant overlap as themes or patterns, the areas of disagreement as slippage and the “realities” not represented in your findings as silences” (Sensing 197). Data was therefore triangulated in this way. The purpose of this study was to identify best practice. Because churches are planted in different contexts, areas of disagreement and slippage needed to be included in the data analysis.

Generalizability

While Anglican churches in the Church of England were the focus for this study, the projects findings can transfer to other settings and contexts. The literature review included reviewing content from a non-Anglican, non-Church of England perspective, and this was very helpful. The findings from this project could be utilized (if contextualized) in most western contexts. Some of the findings can also be applied to church planting more generally.

Project Overview

Following this introduction, Chapter 2 offers an extensive literature review, examining both theological and biblical themes foundational to church planting, alongside best practices gleaned from church history and contemporary church planters. Chapter 3 then outlines the research methodology employed to answer the project's guiding questions. Chapter 4 proceeds with a data analysis and presentation of the research findings. Finally, Chapter 5 integrates the key findings with recommendations for best practices for Church of England church planters seeking to reach young adults with the good news of Jesus.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW FOR THE PROJECT

Overview of the Chapter

The Church of England has invested, and continues to invest, significant resources into church planting. This chapter looks at the biblical and theological foundations for church planting. There is a survey of biblical material in both the Old and New Testaments as well as a review of literature from some of the key voices in the discipline and practice of church planting. As this project is specifically looking at best practices for planting churches that reach young adults, a survey of literature looking at characteristics of young adults today is undertaken from both secular and Christian perspectives. Finally, practitioners who have researched and reached young adults with the gospel are reviewed.

Biblical Foundations

This project looks at how church planting can most effectively reach young adults with the gospel. Planting is a strong theme throughout the Bible, appearing in both the Old and New Testaments. Biblical foundations for planting churches that will reach people with the good news of Jesus will be explored. By examining relevant biblical passages, we can find valuable insights and principles to guide church planting today in reaching young adults and growing the Kingdom of God.

Old Testament

One may expect that exploring the biblical basis for church planting would begin with the New Testament. David Bosch, in his influential work *Transforming*

Mission, argues that the Old Testament lacks examples and evidence of “believers of the old covenant being sent by God to cross geographical, religious, and social frontiers in order to win others to faith in Yahweh” (Chapter 1). Due to this statement, Bosch grounds his exploration of mission mainly in the New Testament. He appears to recognize a crucial distinction between the Old and New Testaments as missionary texts. Frank Viola, in his work on church planting and mission, similarly emphasizes the New Testament as the biblical and theological starting point for those engaging with mission.

Despite the assertions of Bosh and Viola, this research contends that the concepts of mission and planting find their roots in the very nature of God and that the biblical concept of planting is evident from the very beginning of the narrative of scripture. In Genesis 1, as the climax of creation, God establishes a community, calling it into existence through his word. This community, described in Genesis 1.26, reflects God’s character to the world. In creation it can be argued that God “plants ” a community that embodies his attributes and his character. It therefore is a community with a purpose and a mission. Subsequently, Genesis 1.28 outlines a commission entrusted to this community: “be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth.” This command is both a commissioning and a sending, suggesting that this community God has created is supposed to embody a missiological purpose. In Genesis 1, God also grants humanity “dominion” over creation (Gen. 1.28). He calls the community he has created to rule and reign as he would. In other words, they are a community with a purpose. This implies an ongoing responsibility to pattern their lives and shape the

world in accordance with God's character, nature and mission. As a result, the first community of humans are entrusted with God's creation and the call to multiply and have dominion suggests they should continue to be "planting" new communities that continue to reflect God's nature to the world.

Following the creation narrative, Genesis describes the fall of humankind and the introduction of sin into the world. This introduces a problem that God is going to address in the person of Jesus Christ. Christopher Wright, in his work *The Mission of God*, captures this pivotal moment by stating:

The whole Bible could be portrayed as a very long answer to a very simple question: What can God do about the sin and rebellion of the human race? Genesis 12 through to Revelation 22 is God's answer to the question posed by the bleak narratives of Genesis 3—11. Or in terms of the overall argument of this book, Genesis 3—11 sets the problem that the mission of God addresses from Genesis 12 to Revelation 22.

(195)

Wright argues that the Old Testament, far from being a text that is not about mission or empty of missionary themes, is fundamentally a missionary text. He argues that from Genesis 12 onwards the whole narrative of the Old Testament revolves around God's mission to address the problem of sin that has been introduced in Genesis 3-11. This perspective challenges the notion that the Old Testament lacks significant biblical and theological content regarding mission and church planting compared to the New Testament.

The Call of Abraham

In Genesis 12, a pivotal moment in the biblical narrative occurs as the reader of the biblical narrative is introduced to Abraham. He has been chosen by God as the means by which God will bless the nations. The text states:

Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” (Gen. 12.1-3)

In the calling of Abraham, God establishes a covenant between himself and Abraham. God promises that Abraham is going to be made into a great nation. This promise from God presents what looks like a completely insurmountable challenge—how is Abraham going to be turned into a great nation when he and Sarah are childless? However, God has spoken, and his grand missionary plan to establish a community as a blessing to the nations begins to unfold through Abraham the narrative of Genesis develops.

Christopher Wright, in *The Mission of God*, draws significant parallels between these verses in Genesis 12 and the opening verses of scripture in Genesis 1. He writes, “The word of God that spoke into darkness now speaks into barrenness with good news of astonishing reversal, holding before our imagination vistas of a future that is (almost) beyond belief. God’s mission of world redemption begins” (Wright 200). Wright’s work highlights how God’s redemptive mission, that we saw earlier was

initiated in creation, continues through the call of Abraham. Winfield Bevins also identifies the story of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as a key starting point for understanding the concept of church planting. Bevins argues the case that by engaging in church planting, church planters are actively participating in “God’s narrative of history” (17).

The promise that was spoken by God to Abraham encompasses a command to “go... be a blessing” (Gen. 12.1-3). Abraham was sent by God with the ultimate intention of blessing “all the families of the earth” (Gen. 1.:3). It is impossible to bless all the families of the earth unless they are reached in some way. Walter Kaiser states that these verses show that “God’s gift of a blessing through the instrumentality of Abraham was to be experienced by nations, clans, tribes, people groups, and individuals. It would be for every size of group, from the smallest people group to the greatest nation group” (11). He emphasizes the universality of this blessing, drawing a parallel to Adam and Eve’s sin, which distorted the whole created order. Consequently, Kaiser suggests that the sending of Abraham to be a blessing is to be seen as “as universal and extensive in its application” (12).

Kaiser develops this further by stating, “The whole purpose of God was to bless one people so that they might be the channel through which all the nations of the earth might receive a blessing. Israel was to be God’s missionary to the world—and thereby so were all who believed in this same gospel” (12). God, through Abraham, established a community specifically intended to be a conduit of blessing, not only to those who already believed, but also to those who did not believe and who did not

worship God. Abraham was to be a blessing to those who were not yet part of the people of God. God's sending of Abraham demonstrates his intention to spread blessing beyond a singular people group, beyond a particular community. This highlights the inherent missionary nature embedded within the Abrahamic covenant. He was to plant a community that would be a blessing to others.

The very first word that God speaks to Abraham in his promise is "Go". The Hebrew word is *halak* and is often translated as to leave. It implies movement. Abraham actually had to go somewhere. He could not be a blessing by staying where he was. Christopher Wright says that the blessing that was promised through Abraham is "predicated on Abraham actually getting up and going forth" (206). Through the call of Abraham we see that the sending of God, and the response of those being sent, is pivotal for God's redemptive plans and purposes in the world.

In the Old Testament the call of God is worked out in surprising ways. The narrative of Genesis later contains the story of Joseph. His envious brothers plan to kill him but instead sell him into slavery. God uses Joseph in this new and strange land, and despite several setbacks, Joseph finds himself in a position of high office in Egypt. He ultimately becomes Prime Minister and is used by God to be a profound blessing to the nation and the nations around as he saves them all from famine. In Joseph, the Abrahamic call is being outworked. As one biblical commentator, Brian Peterson, on the story of Genesis puts it: "When Joseph is summoned, it is Pharaoh himself who calls him out of prison. This will also set Joseph on a trajectory for God's greater plans

not only in the life of Joseph, but for Jacob's family, Egypt, and the entire world of that region" (348).

Genesis 45 offers a glimpse into Joseph's reflection on these events as he reunites with his brothers, declaring, "So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God" (Gen. 45.8). While on the surface of it, it appears that human events took Joseph to Egypt, Joseph himself believes it is God who took him there. This realization shows Joseph's recognition of God's sovereign hand guiding his footsteps as he was expelled from his homeland and his subsequent pivotal role in blessing and saving Egypt. From a human perspective, his brothers appeared to be the architects of his exile to Egypt, yet, in reality, God orchestrated these circumstances to utilize Joseph as an instrument of blessing.

The narrative continues in Genesis 46, where Jacob, Joseph's father, also receives a call from God to relocate to Egypt. In a vision, God instructs Jacob, "Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make you into a great nation there. I will go down to Egypt with you, and I will surely bring you back again" (Gen. 46.3b-4a). At the end of the narrative of the Joseph story, God sends his people to be planted in a foreign land like Egypt. This further shows the surprising ways God accomplishes his missionary purposes throughout the Old Testament. As Peterson highlights, God is outworking his larger plan for the whole world. "This presence of God in Joseph's life was reflected in the blessing he brought to Egypt, just as he had brought blessing to Potiphar's house and even to the royal prison" (Steinnann 390). By sending his people

to Egypt, God demonstrates his ability to save nations by planting communities of his people in specific locations.

The Psalms

The book of Psalms, which was is worship book of God's people in the Old Testament, reveals a profound understanding of the call God placed on his people to reveal his light and glory to the nations. This missionary understanding appears to be at the very heart of the people's worship of God.

In Psalm 96 the psalmist calls upon the people to "Sing to the Lord; bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day" (Ps. 96.2). This exhortation to praise and proclaim God's saving acts is not merely an inward expression of worship; it serves a broader missiological purpose. The very next verse elaborates on this mission, stating: "Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples" (Ps. 96.3). Here, the psalmist makes it clear that God's people are not simply called to sing a new song, but to actively share their understanding of God's glory and works with all the peoples and the nations around them. The whole of Psalm 96 appears to be a song about the mission of the people of God. Towards the end of the psalm, the psalmist declares: "Say among the nations, 'The Lord is king!'" (Ps. 96.10). This call to proclaim God's kingly reign among the nations shows the responsibility entrusted to God's people not only to be recipients of his blessings but also to be active witnesses to those around them to his sovereignty and power. Even the Psalms are a missiological text.

The missionary imperative of the worship of the people of God is not confined to Psalm 96. In Psalm 22, the psalmist expresses a vision of worship, declaring that “[a]ll the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord, and all the families of the nations shall worship before him” (Ps. 22.27). This verse echoes a promise that has already been explored. The promise was given to Abraham, where God declares that through him, “all the families of the earth will be blessed” (Gen. 12.3). The psalmist sees the fulfillment of this promise through the worship of the one true God by “all the families of the nations.” John Piper says of the Psalms that they require us to summon the whole world to worship God. He says “don’t just tell the earth the facts about the greatness and the glory of God; bid them to join you in praising him. Call for their conversion. All the nations must bow before the one true God of Israel, whom we know now as the Father of our Lord Jesus the Messiah.” Keller writes in *Center Church* that “we are not called simply to communicate the gospel *to* non believers; we must also intentionally celebrate the gospel *before* them” (303). How will all the nations worship God unless the people of God plant themselves as a worshiping community amongst all peoples?

God’s People Planted as Exiles (Jeremiah 29)

The prophet Jeremiah’s ministry and sending by God unfolds in the biblical narrative during a tumultuous and difficult period for the people of God. They have found themselves exiled from their homeland and thrust into the foreign and unfamiliar city of Babylon, the capital of a different empire. The people of God long for their ancestral home and simply want to return to their own land and the city of

Jerusalem. They harbored bitterness, anger, and resentment towards the foreign power that had forcefully transported them. However, in a way that is not dissimilar to the narrative of Joseph, God delivers a message through Jeremiah. Just as Joseph was able to declare that it was not human action that took him to Egypt, God tells his people: “Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon” (Jer. 29.4). This message from God carries significant weight and was meant to change the way the people of God were to view their exile in Babylon. God clarifies that the exile was not a coincidence. It was not an accident, and nor was it the result of Babylonian or human actions. Rather, that the people of God found themselves in Babylon was orchestrated by God’s sovereign hand and plan.

The purpose behind God planting his people into exile unfolds in the subsequent verses. God outlines specific instructions for his people who find themselves planted in a strange land. God urges them:

“Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.” (Jer. 29.5-7)

God gives some very specific instructions to his people. They are to plant themselves in Babylon for the long haul. And they are not just to settle there; like Abraham, they are to be a blessing to the people around them. Through this, God

challenges the growing feelings of resentment and isolation among his people. He calls them to actively engage with the city they find themselves in. They are not simply to exist in a perpetual state of longing for the past. By instructing them to build, plant, and even establish families, God encourages them to integrate into Babylonian society while remaining culturally distinct in their worship of God and how he expects them to behave.

God emphasizes to his people the importance of seeking the well-being of the city of Babylon itself. Through this call, the people of God are to see that their own prosperity is inextricably linked to that of the city of Babylon and the Babylonian people. Not only are they to seek its blessing in material ways, but God calls them to pray for the Babylonian people. This is a surprising turn in the narrative of the Old Testament, but when read in light of what has already been discussed, it is not surprising at all. God has sent and planted his people in Babylon to be a light to the nations so that his unfolding plan that all the families of the earth may be blessed can come to pass.

By sending his people to plant themselves in Babylon, God establishes what looks like a difficult and paradoxical situation. God instructs his people to build a life in Babylon, not as outsiders who should live separate lives from the people of Babylon, but as people who live distinctly from the native Babylonian citizens.

Commenting on Jeremiah 29, Goldingay emphasizes the unexpected nature of this command:

They aren't being urged to seek the welfare of their own city but to commit themselves to a city where they don't belong and that they think they'll soon leave. They're to seek the welfare of the city where they're forced to live because their own welfare is tied up with that city, precisely because they're going to be stuck there... forever as far as the present generation is concerned.

(145)

What God does with his people in exile in Babylon echoes of the story of Joseph in Genesis. Both narratives illustrate a key principle about planting and mission: while human actions may appear to determine the location and circumstances of where God's people are called, he remains in control. God sends and plants his people according to his divine and sovereign plan. In the instance of what we see in Jeremiah 29, God uses the exile in Babylon as an opportunity for his people to become a beacon of light to the great city of Babylon. Through their commitment to planting themselves there, God's people have the potential to influence the entire city.

Throughout the Old Testament narrative, God's people live out their calling and vocation in the midst of competing ideologies, gods, cultures and morals. From Egypt to Babylon, wandering in the desert and encountering other peoples, God's people have a missional imperative to be different so that they may bless others. In his book *A Light to the Nations*, Michael Goheen puts it like this:

The missional calling of the people of Israel to be a blessing to the nations is not silenced when they are carried off to Babylon, nor when they live in the midst of the powerful world empires of Persia, Greece, or Rome, nor when they live in diaspora in

Egypt or elsewhere. Their social life takes different forms in these new contexts, and their missional identity must be nurtured in fresh ways. But they are still a “so-that” people, blessed so that they might in turn be a blessing. They are still a “come and join us” people, inviting the world to participate in God’s own purpose and mission.

(Chapter 3)

This biblical foundation has examined the Old Testament narrative around planting and mission. This examination has revealed a consistent pattern in how God chooses to engage in mission. God sovereignly chooses individuals and communities, planting them in specific locations and contexts at specific times so that they be a blessing to the people around them. By looking at some of the passages that show this pattern, the Old Testament shows us that the concept of planting people in specific places for the sake of mission has been present within God’s heart from the very beginning.

There are some scholars who write about planting and mission and do not prioritize the Old Testament as a biblical foundation for these themes. Many popular books on church planting and mission typically dedicate sections or chapters to the biblical foundations for the practice, yet often focus solely on the New Testament. For instance, in *Planting Missional Churches*, Setzer and Im advocate that “before planting a church, we start with the Bible to understand and build on the clear New Testament patterns of church planting” (Setzer and Im, Chapter 3). However, despite alluding to the fact that they must engage with the whole Bible, they go on to only reference New Testament passages.

This research project contends that the church today has much to learn from the biblical foundations of the Old Testament's narrative around God planting people for the sake of mission. The Old Testament shows how he strategically "plants" them for missionary purposes, so that all the nations can be blessed. If Michael Goheen is correct that the Old Testament narrative depicts God's people continually learning and understanding their missional identity as they are planted in diverse contexts then as church planters today understanding these experiences, they, as leaders in the contemporary church, are equipped to learn from the Old Testament and apply those lessons to the best practice of church planting today.

New Testament

The Gospels

The themes of planting and sending continue to be developed within the New Testament narrative. John's Gospel opens with the declaration, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1.1). John highlights Jesus' divinity in the opening verses of his gospel. However, one of the most remarkable statements in John's introduction to the gospel is when he says of Jesus that "the Word became flesh and lived among us..." (John 1.14). The incarnation signifies the ultimate planting of God Himself among humanity, allowing us to witness his glory firsthand. God not only sends others into communities, he sent himself in the person of Jesus.

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus consistently acknowledges his role as the one sent by the Father. In John 5 alone, he refers to being sent in verses 23, 24, 30, and 37.

He constantly reminds his disciples and those he is speaking to of his own mission. In fact, phrases like “the one who sent me” or “the Father who sent me” become recurring motifs and sayings throughout John’s Gospel.

This understanding of Jesus’ being “sent” and “planted” in a specific place and time for a specific mission directly translates to those who follow him and is particularly true of those who are seeking to plant churches. Following on from his resurrection, Jesus, in John 20.21, says to the disciples: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” This act of Jesus sending the disciples finds its culmination in the Great Commission. However, this ultimate sending of the great commission is preceded by Jesus’ repeated acts of sending the disciples throughout the Gospels. All three synoptic gospels recount Jesus sending out the twelve disciples (Luke 9, Matthew 10, and Mark 6), highlighting how sending was intrinsic to both his own mission and what he expects of those who follow him.

Stetzer and Im capture the essence of the sending of Jesus from the Father and then Jesus sending the disciples when they write that “Since the Father had sent Jesus ‘to seek and to save the lost’ (Luke 19:10), Jesus sends us with the same goal of the Father - to seek and save the lost. For Christ followers, this direction can’t be clearer. We are to pick up Jesus’ earthly work and continue doing it” (Stetzer and Im, Chapter 3). In this sense, being sent becomes an essential aspect of following Jesus himself. Followers of Jesus should expect to be sent and planted in places where they can point people to Jesus and share the gospel with them.

The Great Commission - A Commission to Plant Churches

The Great Commission, found at the end of the Matthew's Gospel, can be understood as the culmination of Jesus' teaching regarding his sending of those who follow him.

In some senses the entire narrative about Jesus calling and teaching the disciples preceding this key moment serves as a foundation for the disciples' future mission in acting out the great commission. In Matthew 28.18-20, Jesus declares:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

The great commission outlines a threefold mission for the disciples. First, Jesus emphasizes the importance of the disciples being sent beyond their immediate surroundings—Jesus says they are to “Go.” This reveals that those who follow Jesus are sent. Second, they are tasked with leading those they are sent to into a committed relationship with Jesus Christ. They do this by making disciples of those they meet, just as Jesus has done with them. Thirdly, they are to baptize and teach. Baptism is the way into the Christian faith and discipleship, while ongoing growth of love for Jesus and the things of his Kingdom come through teaching.

The content of the great commission itself can be seen as a mandate from Jesus to go and plant churches. The reason for this is that the great commission contains all the necessary elements that make up the church. Jesus sends his disciples out, mirroring his own being sent by the Father, highlighting the act of “sending” as a core principle.

Baptism, a central sacrament of the church, is explicitly mentioned. Finally, the ongoing instruction of believers through teaching is a cornerstone of any church community. Where you get a gathering of believers, baptism and the teachings of the scripture, you have the church.

Stetzer and Im observe that “the earliest churches obeyed the Great Commission by planting new congregations to carry out the assignments of discipling, baptizing, and teaching that would begin the multiplication process of planting more and more churches” (Stetzer and Im Chapter 3). They further elaborate, suggesting that “we can assume Jesus expected his listeners to evangelize and to gather the new believers into local congregations where they could be discipled, baptized, and taught..” (Stetzer and Im, Chapter 3).

If Stetzer and Im are correct, the implications for the church and disciples today are profound. The Great Commission, seen by many as the core missionary mandate of the New Testament, can be viewed as a call not only to spread the gospel but also to establish local communities of believers—in essence, to plant churches.

This understanding of the great commission highlights the centrality of church planting within the ongoing mission entrusted to all people who follow Jesus.

Lucien Legrand sheds light on this perspective in his work, noting, “In Matthew, ‘mission’ denotes a long-term program: sacrament, continuous formation, an ethic in accordance with the new justice... Proclamation was not enough. Initiation and formation were required. An ecclesial framework was required” (78). In other words, it is not enough to say that mission is only evangelism, serving the poor or teaching.

On their own all these things are insufficient; initiation, formation, and an “ecclesial framework”—a framework built upon the church—are all deemed essential.

When viewed through the eyes of Legrand, church planting is no longer an optional add-on. Instead, it becomes central to the overall mission of God. While the term “church planting” is absent from the Great Commission itself, Stetzer and Im compellingly argue that the subsequent actions of the disciples serve as a powerful testament. They write, “It’s obvious by their actions that the first hearers of the Great Commission assumed its fulfillment required multiplying disciples and forming new congregations. The first believers heard the Commission, left their homes, and went out to make disciples and plant churches” (Stetzer and Im, Chapter 3). The response of the early church to the great commission only strengthens the intrinsic link between the Great Commission and the planting of churches.

Eleanor and Alan Kreider say that in the scriptures “God’s strategizing and action are characterized by sending” (48). The New Testament narrative builds towards God “[s]ending the church to be a light to the nations, to bear witness to Christ and the kingdom, and to be the primary instrument of God’s mission” (Kreider and Kreider 48). The activity of the disciples as told in the book of Acts by Luke is compelling evidence that the disciples interpreted Jesus’ sending as a directive to plant churches. Here, we witness God sending his people to establish churches in all kinds of locations across the mediterranean.

In this sense the New Testament narrative can be viewed as a continuation of God’s sending and planting strategy in the Old Testament. Similar to his people being

“planted” in the foreign and unfamiliar land of Babylon, tasked with living a distinctive life that would bless the entire city, or Joseph being sent to Egypt, so too are the people of God sent to be planted in the New Testament. Michael Goheen, in his book *Introducing Missional Theology*, elaborates on this concept, stating, “The gift of the kingdom of God calls for a life that embodies the good news that God’s end time power of renewal has arrived. Jesus spends a great deal of time teaching his disciple community a distinctive way of life that will stand as a contrast to the surrounding culture and make clear that the day of God’s kingdom has dawned” (Goheen Chapter 4). This is precisely what God asked his people to do in the Old Testament.

The Fulfillment of the Old Testament “Blessed to be a Blessing”

In the New Testament the early church grapples with the practicalities of living as a distinct community amidst different cultures and that they often would face hostility. Paul’s writings highlight this grappling of the first New Testament church plants. In his letter to the Romans, he urges them not to “be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Rom. 12.2). Similarly, when writing to the church in Ephesus, he implores them that “I affirm and insist in the Lord: you must no longer walk as the Gentiles walk, in the futility of their minds” (Eph. 4.17). To the new church plant in Corinth Paul offers encouragement with the words, “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; look, new things have come into being” (2 Cor. 5.17).

These letters to the church plants of the New Testament show that they were to live different kinds of lives to the people and cultures around them. They were to serve

as if they were the light illuminating the darkness, mirroring Jesus as the light of the world. Again, this is not a new concept, this call on God's people is evident through the whole of the Old Testament. The instructions God gives Moses to convey to his people in Leviticus begin with a similar call to distinctiveness: "I am the LORD your God. You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you lived, and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you" (Lev. 18.2-3). Just as the call on the people in the Old Testament who were going to Egypt from Canaan was to not do what those people did, God's act of planting his people in the New Testament comes with the expectation that they will live according to His calling.

The call to live a distinct life for the early church stemmed from Jesus' command in the Great Commission. The great commission is repeated at the beginning of Acts. If any doubt lingered regarding Jesus' intentions in "making disciples of all nations," he clarified and repeated it again just before his ascension: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1.8).

The commission becomes abundantly clear for the disciples. They are to plant churches all over the earth. The God who sends them has a global mission in mind, just as he always had done. This is the fulfillment of the longstanding call for God's people to serve as a light to the nations. This means that the disciples must plant churches in environments devoid of any concept of the one true God, the promise of Jesus or even any understanding of scripture at all.

Church planters can learn lessons from these first churches that were planted in the aftermath of the great commission. They were planted amidst entirely new cultural landscapes and by studying their experiences, church planters can gain crucial insights into how to plant churches in contemporary settings or in contexts that are seemingly unreached with the good news of Jesus, such as young adults in England. In England today, there is a growing demographic that shares characteristics similar to those encountered by the early church—a population who do not know that Jesus is Lord and Saviour. Understanding how the early church navigated these challenges equips us to effectively plant churches that can reach and engage those with no faith today.

In the book of Acts, the concept of the λόγος (Logos) plays an active and central role in the narrative's development. While a deeper exploration of church planting as the planting of the gospel will be explored later, a foundational understanding of the Logos' role is important. In his work on the book of Acts, Daniel McGinnis argues that the Holy Spirit's work at Pentecost serves as a catalyst, initiating the preaching and subsequent dispersion of the word of God among the people. The preaching of the word therefore becomes a focal point for missionaries in the book of Acts. (McGinnis Chapter 1)

Throughout the book of Acts, the Word is depicted as leading and guiding the witnesses, rather than the other way around. Acts 13.44-49 exemplifies this. In this passage people gather not simply to hear the missionaries speak, but to actively engage with the Word itself—to hear it, respond to it, and offer praise in response. The ministry of the word helps lead to the planting of churches. As McGinnis emphasizes,

“In Acts, the λόγος takes on a life of its own, as it vigorously leads the mission forward” (Chapter 1).

McGinnis acknowledges that it is not only the ministry of the word that drives the planting of churches and the mission of followers of Jesus. The Holy Spirit plays a pivotal and key role in this process too. McGinnis highlights that Luke, the author of Acts, routinely and meticulously highlights the significant role of the Holy Spirit in establishing, nurturing, and safeguarding the early church and church plants. The Spirit empowers believers for bold proclamation of the word. The early church depended on God’s power through the Holy Spirit, rather than on human strength. Acts prioritizes the Spirit as a vital force propelling Christian mission and church planting forward.

Through his narrative Luke encourages his readers to embrace and follow the power and leading of the Holy Spirit. The message that Luke is giving is clear: the same prophetic Spirit that inspired ancient prophets and empowered Jesus’ ministry is the same Holy Spirit that empowers followers of Jesus today. In other words, Luke highlights the Spirit’s essential role in Christian mission and church planting across all times and places. McGinnis succinctly captures this sentiment, stating that “Acts directs readers not to comprehend the Spirit, but to live in and from the person of the Spirit, and to follow the Spirit’s cross-cultural missional journey throughout human history and across the earth” (Chapter 2).

By the time readers arrive at Acts 11 and 12, a church has been planted in Antioch, Syria. This young and fragile church community swiftly embraces the

sending imperative that has been explored in this review, and this prompts the church to send people from within the church to engage in mission and church planting. Luke tells us that God instructs the church to set Barnabas and Saul apart for missionary work (Acts 13.2). While verse 3 states that “the church sent them off” (Acts 13.3), verse 4 immediately clarifies the ultimate source of their sending: “The two of them, sent on their way by the Holy Spirit” (Acts 13.4). This dual emphasis shows the collaborative nature of the sending process, that the church sends people as the Spirit sends them.

John Stott, in his work, draws a compelling parallel between this sending in Acts 13 and the divine call of Abraham in Genesis 12. He observes:

The nature of the work to which he [God] had called Barnabas and Saul was not specified. It was not unlike the call of Abram. God had said to him, “Go . . . to the land I will show you.” And God said to the church in Antioch, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” In both cases the call to go was clear, while the land and the work were not. So in both cases the response to God’s call required an adventurous step of faith.

(Stott 198)

This ‘adventurous step of faith,’ as Stott describes it, not only fueled Paul’s extensive missionary journeys but also led to the planting of churches across a significant portion of the Roman Empire during his ministry.

Case Study: Philippi

Sent by God

Acts 16 offers a fascinating case study of how the church was planted in Philippi. Luke recounts Paul's travels through the region with his companions. Their initial plan was to revisit Galatia, but "the Holy Spirit prevented them from doing so" (Acts 16.6). The Holy Spirit also would not let them enter Bithynia (Acts 16.7). These interventions by the Holy Spirit are noteworthy and again highlight the importance of his role in church planting.

The narrative then takes a pivotal turn. During the night, Paul receives a vision of a man from Macedonia pleading with them to come and offer assistance (Acts 16.9). The response is immediate: "After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them" (Acts 16.10). Here, Paul and his companions actively interpret the events, the thwarted travel plans and the subsequent vision, as a call from God to a new location. They realized they had been called to plant a church.

Obeying the Great Commission

Upon arriving in Macedonia, Paul and his companions strategically head towards Philippi, which is described by Luke as the region's leading city (Acts 16.12). On the Sabbath, they venture to the river, a known gathering place for Jews who wanted to pray when there weren't enough of them to form a synagogue (Acts 16.13). Here, they encounter a group of women, one of whom, Lydia, becomes a central figure in the story of how the church was planted in Philippi. After attentively listening to Paul's teachings, "the Lord opened her heart" (Acts 16.14) which led to her immediate

conversion and baptism. We are told that “the members of her household” were also baptized (Acts 16.15). A church has now been planted in Philippi. Paul and his team receive hospitality from Lydia and end up staying in her home (Acts 16.15). It is more than likely that Lydia’s house becomes the birthplace of the Philippian church.

The narrative in Acts 16 unfolds in a way that directly mirrors the core principles of the Great Commission. Paul and his companions act in accordance with the great commission as they have been sent by God to plant themselves where he calls them. When they arrive in Philippi their actions and ministry align perfectly with Jesus’ command in that they actively make disciples through the act of baptism (Acts 16.15).

A light to the nations

While the church may have begun with Lydia and her household, it was not long before the church grew. The narrative in Acts 16.16-18 details the liberation of a demon-possessed slave girl through Paul’s ministry. While her immediate fate after her deliverance is not clear in the book of Acts, it is not unreasonable to suggest that it was likely that she joined the growing church plant that was meeting at Lydia’s house. This potential addition signifies the church’s early embrace of gentiles.

The story of what was unfolding in Philippi then takes a dramatic turn as Paul and his team are sent to prison for causing a disturbance in the city (Acts 16.19-24). Despite this apparent setback their faith and commitment to the sending and call of Jesus remained unwavering. Paul and his companions engage in worship within the confines of the prison, an act witnessed by the jailer and their fellow prisoners (Acts

16.25). This moment culminates in the jailer's conversion and baptism, along with his entire household (Acts 16.31-33). The church continues to grow amongst the gentiles.

By the time Paul departs from Philippi, there is a young church plant in Philippi. Luke's use of the term "brothers and sisters" in Acts 16.40 suggests a significant growth in the number of people who were part of the church. This growing community transcends social barriers, encompassing Jews and Gentiles, businesswomen and jailers, young and old. Gaukroger says that this was one of the defining characteristics of the early church. He says that one of the main signs of growth in the early church was not just the growth in numbers but growth in missionary zeal that "pushed back the boundaries of gender, colour, race and nationality" and that this helped the gospel take unreached territory as the gospel was seen as something for everyone (Gaukroger 37).

The story of the church plant in Philippi in Acts 16 echoes the promise made to Abraham in Genesis 12. The Philippian church, with its diverse membership from its earliest days, embodies the concept of God's people being sent to be a "blessing to the nations"; they were continuing the call that was placed on Abraham. The church planting story in Philippi serves as a model for planting churches today that cross ethnic and social divisions, fulfilling the promise that God would bless all the families of the earth through Abraham.

Theological Foundations

Ecclesiology

Engaging in discussion surrounding church planting necessitates a foundational exploration of ecclesiology. The term “church” holds slightly different meanings and interpretations across individuals and denominations. This means it is important to work with a clear definition. This study’s understanding of church is shaped by the Anglican tradition and its doctrine as research in this project is being carried out in the Church of England.

According to Article 19 of the Thirty-Nine Articles, the visible Church of Christ is comprised of a congregation of faithful believers. Within this congregation, the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments are duly administered in accordance with Christ’s ordinances. In other words, the church is a physical gathering centered around the proclamation of the Word and the celebration of the Sacraments. Therefore, the absence of any one of these three core elements—a gathering of believers, the preaching of the Word, or the administration of the Sacraments—would preclude a group, even one composed of Christians, from being considered a true church.

The concept of the church as a physical gathering, as defined above, must carry significant weight for the practice of church planting within the Church of England. If the church is a physical gathering, the physical space the church will inhabit and the physical community the church seeks to serve become very important. Church planters

must give deliberate thought to the location where the church will minister, ensuring it will enable the gathering of the church and those they hope to reach.

The Anglican definition of church outlined above gives planters in the Church of England a way for assessing the legitimacy and maturity of newly planted churches. For example, while some contemporary thinkers might consider online communities or virtual churches as valid expressions of the church, the Anglican understanding would disagree. This is not to say churches should not try and occupy the online space, but it can't be the only space they operate in. Bonhoeffer in *Life Together* writes that "the physical presence of other Christians is a source of incomparable joy and strength to the believer" (8). The physical gathering of faithful believers, the preaching of the Word, and the administration of the Sacraments are indispensable components that make up the church. They cannot be disregarded or replaced. Therefore, for Anglican church planters, prioritizing physical gatherings, the teaching and preaching of the Word, and the proper administration of the Sacraments is paramount in ensuring they are actually planting churches.

Missiologists have also emphasized the centrality of these specific aspects within Paul's approach to church planting. In other words, this understanding may not just be a quirk of being Anglican; it is also found in the scriptures. Missiologist Roland Allen identifies two key components of Paul's teaching. The first is a "simple system of gospel teaching" (Allen Chapter 3), which focuses on communicating the core facts surrounding Christ's life as well as the Old Testament. Beyond foundational knowledge, Allen highlights the importance of practical instruction surrounding the

core practices of the church. He observes that Paul “taught them the administration and the meaning of baptism and the Lord’s Supper. There is not a shadow of evidence to support the notion that these were considered optional in the early church. In the writings of Paul, it is taken for granted that every Christian has been baptized and all meet regularly for the Lord’s Supper” (Allen Chapter 3). According to Allen, Paul’s writings consistently portray baptism and regular participation in the Lord’s Supper as normative experiences for Christians. The early Christians were learning about the church through these things.

Drawing upon these observations, Allen concludes that there were four things that “Paul deemed necessary for the establishment of his churches, and only four. A tradition or elementary creed, baptism and the Lord’s Supper, ordination, and the Holy Scriptures” (Chapter 3)⁰ Allen’s argument strengthens the case that these four elements formed the essential building blocks for a church effectively reaching its surrounding culture with the gospel message. They may also be key building blocks for the planting of churches themselves.

While missiologists generally agree on the importance of these practices, not all see them as defining characteristics of a church. Michael Moynagh, a proponent of the Fresh Expressions movement in the UK, argues for a more relational approach to defining what constitutes a church:

Understanding church in terms of practices – of gathering round the word, celebrating the sacraments and other expected behaviours – fails to do justice

to how any one practice originates in conversation, is constantly being changed through conversation and has a meaning that varies, if only in tiny degrees, from one conversation to another. Church is a myriad flow of communication exchanges, weaving in and out of each other. What makes it distinct from other organizations is that it is embraced within the conversations of the Trinity... practices cannot define the church because Christians are unable to agree about these practices. (255)

This view has been espoused by many in the fresh expressions movement, but this position may well be incongruous with church history. Firstly, as we have already seen through the work of Allen and in our biblical foundations, this flies in the face of the evidence available to us about how churches were planted in the Bible. In Maxwell Johnson's work on the sacraments he is very clear that the consistent view through church history is that the sacraments have not just been seen as essential for the church, but that they have consistently been viewed as essential for salvation. It is not until he gets to looking at The Friends movement and Kant (in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries) that the centrality of the sacraments in the life of the church begins to be questioned (Johnson 23).

Secondly, theological disagreements amongst Christians regarding specific practices should not necessitate a corresponding weakening of our understanding of what makes up the church within the Church of England. A watering down of what it means to be the church, essentially reducing elements to their least common

denominator, would diminish the full potential of the Church in mission and discipleship. To eliminate the sacramental nature of the Church would mean losing something of the incarnational nature of church, and this would be a serious problem in the field of church planting. John Stott, when talking about the mission of the church being modeled on the mission of Christ, writes that “he became one of us without ceasing to be himself” (20). The church too should be incarnational without ceasing to be the church.

Matthew Kauth, writing from a Catholic perspective, concludes his work by emphasizing the sacraments as an extension of Christ’s ministry (Ch. 9). If this is indeed the case, and Christ’s ministry encompasses reaching contemporary young adults, then dismissing or diluting the sacraments for ecumenical or theological expediency becomes untenable. David Watson, a prominent scholar within the Church of England, argued at the beginning of the charismatic movement in the Church of England that a “renewal of the true sacramental life of the church... would enhance, not detract from, the mission of the church in our spiritually starved society” (226). This perspective shows the necessity for the Church to refocus on its sacramental life for the sake of mission and church planting.

Cris Rogers, a UK-based church planter with significant experience reaching young adults, proposes a compelling argument for a core element uniting all churches everywhere. He acknowledges the existence of various unifying factors but ultimately contends that one core practice stands out: a shared meal (Rogers 118). While Rogers acknowledges the variations in what this meal may be called, he emphasizes the

unifying power inherent in this shared experience of a meal. Dismissing a practice due to semantic disagreements or slight theological discrepancies seems counterproductive to the core mission of the church.

Thirdly, the sacraments make sense of what the Fresh Expression movement is trying to achieve. While the Fresh Expressions movement emphasizes incarnational mission, the sacraments themselves embody the concept of the Incarnation. Andrew Davidson, writing from an Anglo-Catholic perspective, argues that the “message of the New Testament is of ‘God among us’. We should hardly expect that the new covenant - of Christ’s body, of his blood - would make the practice of faith less physical. Indeed the message of ‘the Word made flesh’ makes faith more physical for Christians, not less, and more tangible” (8). He goes on to say that because we were not redeemed immaterially it should not surprise us that redemption comes to us materially. He concludes his argument by highlighting the role of physical elements in God’s work: “The work of salvation takes in water, bread and wine, human hands and voices. And behind both of those facets to God’s work—word and sacrament—lies the incarnation of Christ, the Word made flesh” (Davidson 12).

Davidson argues that the Incarnation makes the sacraments necessary. God’s physical presence necessitates a physical response in our own acts of worship, we use water, bread and wine. This should also be the case in mission. This theological perspective raises a crucial question: How can the Fresh Expressions movement engage in incarnational mission or church planting without the very tools—the sacraments—that Jesus himself provided to make the Incarnation a tangible reality in

our world today?

Fourthly, a move away from the sacraments and an Anglican understanding of church denies what many are now finding to be true in their experience of reaching people with the gospel: that liturgical and sacramental worship is connecting culturally with people who have not been to church before. Several scholars point to the effectiveness of liturgical and sacramental practices in reaching new demographics.

Dr. Glenn Packiam, in his book *Blessed, Broken, Given*, recounts his experience experimenting with outreach methods when he was asked to take on his church's evening service. He found that establishing a weekly communion in this service enabled the church to reach "thousands of others 'longing for a way to be led to Jesus - simply, purely, and even liturgically'" (Packiam Chapter 4). Winfield Bevens, in *Ever Ancient, Ever New*, explores the phenomenon of young adults connecting with modern and liturgical forms of church. He argues that rather than churches trying new things to fit in with culture, perhaps "the answer is in opening the treasure chest of the past and retrieving the beauty of church history" (Bevens, Chapter 1). This perspective resonates with the findings of McDonnell and Montague, who link the centrality of the sacraments to early church planting in Africa. They believe that the sacrament of communion propelled those early believers to plant more churches as it was in this sacrament that the church remembered God had sent his son, who in turn sent the apostles and they then founded churches in various cities (McDonnell and Montague 94). They cite Tertullian's second-century teachings in support of this view. Andrew Wilson's book *Spirit and Sacrament* encourages readers

involved in church planting to introduce sacramental worship from the beginning as it is so much easier to do that than change the culture later on (171-72).

Church Planting as Evangelism

In his influential work *Center Church*, Tim Keller argues that mission must extend beyond just seeing individual salvation. He emphasizes the importance of seeing people who are reached with the gospel join the church community. He states that the focus should be “incorporating them into a new community that partners with God in redeeming social structures and healing the world” (Keller Chapter 19). In essence, mission is not solely about evangelism on an individual level but about integrating individuals into a community, and not just any community, but the church. This perspective aligns with the work of Hellerman, who posits that salvation is not an individualistic event, but rather a “community-creating event” (Chapter 6). Following this logic, wherever evangelism takes root, the establishment or planting of a church must become a reality. In a contemporary western cultural context characterized by declining church attendance, particularly among young adults, Keller and Hellerman’s findings translate to the requirement for evangelistic strategies that prioritize church planting.

John Stott argues that “local church evangelism can claim to be the most normal, natural and productive method of spreading the gospel today” (20). Tim Keller emphasizes the centrality of church planting in Christian mission, arguing that “the continual planting of new congregations is the single most crucial strategy for... the numerical growth of the body of Christ... Nothing else will have the consistent

impact of dynamic, extensive church planting” (“Why Plant Churches?”). He grounds this perspective in the New Testament’s missionary mandates and calls to evangelism, interpreting them as inherently intertwined with establishing churches. In essence, Keller posits that increasing the number of churches directly correlates with numerical Christian growth. This aligns with the concept of church planting itself being a distinct and focused evangelistic strategy. David Pytches, a forerunner of the recent church planting movement within the Church of England, echoes this sentiment. He observes that the first three years of a church plant’s life yield evangelistic results that are “exceptionally fruitful” (Pytches 293). This suggests that church planting is not simply a consequence of evangelism but rather a powerful evangelistic tool in itself.

While Stefan Paas acknowledges that the term “church planting” is not explicitly mentioned in scripture, he ultimately arrives at a similar conclusion. He argues that the New Testament depicts churches as the outcome of “gospel planting” (Paas Chapter 1.1) He argues that in the New Testament a church or Christian community “is never the object of a missionary activity. He says that this is in part due to an underdeveloped doctrine of what it meant to be the church in the first few years after Jesus’ death and resurrection. However, what he does say is that in the New Testament “a church, or a Christian community, can be designated as the result of a process of gospel planting” (Paas, Chapter 1.1) This aligns with contemporary practitioners like Daniel McGinnis, who highlights the driving force of the Word of God in early church mission. Similarly, David Male emphasizes the primacy of

evangelism, stating, “we do not plant a church from which to evangelise, we evangelise and see a church take place as God works” (117).

The relationship between evangelism and church planting presents a fascinating theological and historical question. While there may be debate about the precise order of whether evangelism or church planting comes first, it appears theologically impossible to separate them entirely. This point is supported not only by the scriptural commands of Jesus and the practices of the early church that have already been discussed but also by a deeper understanding of the gospel message itself.

Stefan Paas acknowledges this inherent connection. Paas notes that once the term ‘church-planting’ came into widespread use in the early church we can be confident that the idea of church was not a “mere afterthought to the gospel and the kingdom of God. Somehow there is an ecclesial dimension in the message about Jesus Christ and his reign” (Paas Chapter 1.1). In essence, Paas suggests that the message of Jesus Christ and his reign necessarily carries an ecclesial dimension—talking about the gospel inherently involves the formation of a community of believers and the planting of a church.

This resonates with Roland Allen’s observations on Paul’s missionary strategy. Allen identifies a key distinction between Paul’s approach and contemporary practices: Paul “founded churches” whereas we often establish “missions”. This suggests that missions are done to the people being evangelized; missions are never owned by the people on the end of them. Paul, however, would preach in a place for

several months “and then left behind a church, not necessarily free from the need of guidance, but capable of growth and expansion” (Allen Chapter 7). This church plant would be ‘owned’ by those who received the gospel in a way they could not own a ‘mission’ and so became something that would continue to bear fruit and grow. If this is the case, we must take this finding seriously if we are to create communities and churches that the young adults who are being reached feel like they can shape and call their own.

The missiologist Christopher Wright offers a compelling perspective on the relationship between church and mission: “it is not so much the case that God has a mission for his church in the world but that God has a church for his mission in the world. Mission was not made for the church; the church was made for mission” (Chapter 2). This theological framework emphasizes the inherent missionary nature of the church. If, as Wright argues, the church exists primarily to fulfill God’s mission, then a growing need for evangelism necessitates the multiplication of churches to reach more people effectively. Therefore, this must be particularly true of places where young adults live, as most of them have no meaningful contact with the church.

This aligns with the commitment made by Anglican ministers in the Church of England. Upon being licensed to a new post, they promise to “proclaim afresh in each generation” the gospel of Jesus Christ. Church planting emerges as a potentially powerful tool for fulfilling this promise, particularly in reaching young adults. New churches provide an opportunity to present the timeless message of the gospel in fresh,

culturally relevant ways that resonate with young adults. This resonates with John McGinley's

findings on church planting in the UK. His research indicates that “newly planted churches have a higher percentage of people involved who did not previously belong to a church” (McGinley 117). This suggests that church planting may be particularly effective in attracting individuals who have not been previously connected to traditional church structures such as young adults.

Prayer

The power of prayer in church planting is often overlooked. While studying the latest best practices undoubtedly hold merit, historical precedence demonstrates that the church flourishes most when it actively seeks dependence on the Holy Spirit's person, power, and presence. Researchers who have studied revivals amongst young adults in the past consistently corroborate and emphasize the importance of prayer.

Jaeson Ma, through his research on church planting on university campuses amongst university students, emphasizes the centrality of prayer whilst church planting. Ma states that nearly every documented revival throughout history appears to have its origins in prayer. His work highlights a particularly pertinent finding for the purposes of this research project, that revivals amongst university students “started with students praying on college campuses” (Ma 97). While Ma's research offers an important insight for ministry amongst university students, his research underlines the importance of prayer in all missionary activity.

Similar observations are made by Michael Gleason in his research on spiritual awakenings amongst young adults on university campuses. While Gleason acknowledges the undeniable good of meticulous planning and dedicated Christian service within these revivals, he states that many students were inexplicably and simply “brought back to faith without any human planning” (Gleason 75). In tracing the origins of these campus-based revivals amongst university students, Gleason consistently finds that prayer plays a significant role.

Winfield Bevins’ book *Global Voices* further strengthens the case for prayer’s centrality in church planting. This book looks at church planting beyond the Western context. Bevins takes some time in this book to specifically focus on church planting in India. Planters in this context emphasized the transformative power of prayer in winning people to Jesus. Interestingly, they also highlight the role of that fasting alongside prayer (Bevins, *Global Voices* 123). Perhaps the reason prayer is so important sheds light on the title chosen by the current Archbishop of York, Stephen Cottrell, for his leadership book. He called the book *Hit the Ground Kneeling*. This provocative title is a reminder of the indispensable role of prayer in laying the groundwork for a thriving church. Cotterell writes that leaders are often so busy they never get round to discerning their “primary calling” (18). The practice of prayer may well be best practice for church planters.

Other Best Practice in Church Planting

In Keller’s seminal book on church planting, he writes that, in the New Testament, “planting churches is not an unnatural or traumatic event. It is woven into

the warp and woof of ministry, and so it happens steadily and normally” (794).

Keller’s work sends a clear and powerful message to church planters and leaders: church planting should not be a secondary concern. Instead, it should be woven into the very core of every ministry philosophy. Church planting should be at the heart of every church’s vision.

Prior to beginning a discussion regarding best practices in church planting, it is wise to acknowledge and analyze contrasting approaches that may not be considered best practice. Tim Keller offers valuable insights into “unnatural” forms of church planting, which deviate from best practices altogether. The first of these he terms “Defiant church planting” (Keller, *Center Church*, 797). This kind of church planting arises when members of a local church depart due to conflict or doctrinal disagreements, and subsequently establish a new church. The second form of suboptimal church planting, as defined by Keller, is “Reluctant church planting” (Keller 797). This occurs when church planting initiatives are driven by external circumstances, such as a congregation exceeding the capacity of its building or the need for additional services due to space limitations. Neither of these types of planting have been meticulously planned and birthed in prayer.

Numerical growth will always have a certain allure and attraction to church planters as they long to see the results of people coming to know Jesus as Lord and Saviour. Powell and James offer a critical reminder to this when they say that the real aim of church planting should not be a “tally of church plants; it’s healthy churches for

the long term” (96). Establishing churches devoid of healthy spiritual life and the capacity to replicate a godly vision will ultimately prove counterproductive.

Gareth Robinson, a seasoned church planter in the North of England, provides a compelling perspective in his book *Stones and Ripples*. He argues that the impact a church planter generates is “directly proportional to holiness, demonstrated through obedience” (Robinson 40). Robinson’s central idea is that the spiritual health of a leader directly influences the impact a church or pioneering initiative can exert on its local community.

Ott and Wilson support the work of Robinson. In their attempt to synthesize various studies on church planting effectiveness they highlight a crucial finding. They state that “a study of 528 mission agencies found that nearly three quarters of all missionary attrition was due to preventable causes” (Ott and Wilson, 489). Building upon this data, they arrive at a clear conclusion: mission work, and by extension church planting, carries a significant potential impact on personal, marital, and family life. Ott and Wilson reach what they say is an obvious conclusion and sum up the findings as follows:

“The obvious conclusion: mission work in general and church planting in particular have a very high degree of impact on one’s personal, marital, and family life. Furthermore, many church planters, being highly task oriented, have a tendency to overlook personal challenges and neglect some dimensions of their personal lives. Most church-planting books fail to address the personal dimensions of church planting, but our observation is that planters are just as likely to fall short because of

personal inadequacies or an inability to work on a team as they are because of a flawed strategy.” (489)

This serves as a crucial reminder to those involved in church planting, that the foundation of best practice lies in the health of the leader. Ott and Wilson acknowledge a critical gap in current resources, noting that “the planter’s personal and spiritual life has yet to receive adequate attention in current literature and training” (489). While publications like Gareth Robinson’s *Stones and Ripples* offer valuable insights into why the character and holiness of a church planter matter, further research and writing are necessary to fully explore the correlation between a leader’s health and the effectiveness of church planting.

Building upon this concept, Ott and Wilson reference a study by Dick Grady and Glenn Kendall (1992) which identified prayer as the “number-one factor for success in church planting” (Ott and Wilson 496). This study, surveying a hundred church planters, demonstrates a clear link between spiritual health and successful church planting. Spiritual health must therefore be a top priority for those planting churches.

This finding finds strong support from church planters based in the UK. Bishop Matthew Porter, an experienced church planter who has equipped teams across Northern England, looks at the characteristics of successful church planting movements in his book *Overflow*. While outlining at least ten distinct characteristics, he prioritizes prayer, arguing that it served as the cornerstone of church planting in the

New Testament and continues to be foundational for such movements throughout history (Porter 184-85). This sentiment resonates with Gavin and Anne Calver. Examining the early church in Acts, they observe that prayer served as the birthplace of the movement itself. They contend that the contemporary church can learn valuable lessons from these first documented church planting initiatives, emphasizing that “God will move when we begin to pray” (Calver and Calver 15). The Calvers urge the modern church to embrace the belief that all significant moves of God stem from the place of prayer.

Tim Morey’s recent work, *Planting a Church Without Losing Your Soul*, provides compelling support for the points raised by Ott and Wilson. Published in 2020, Morey argues that while “vocational competencies” are often prioritized in identifying suitable church planters, equal emphasis should be placed on cultivating “spiritual competencies” (12-13). Significantly, Morey contends that these spiritual competencies can be nurtured and developed just as we think vocational competencies can. Morey contends that attending to the leader’s soul and fostering spiritual competencies should be viewed paramount in best practices for church planting.

Mark Sayers, in his book *Disappearing Church*, cautions church leaders against succumbing to the allure of quick fixes, which he terms “solutionism” (48). To use Morey’s language, vocational competencies are not going to fix the problems the church faces. Instead, Sayers urges his readers to remember that the answer to the challenges faced by the contemporary church in reaching surrounding cultures remains the Gospel itself (48). While leadership is a well-explored topic, Sayers reminds us

that the Gospel itself serves as our most potent weapon in cultural engagement and seeing communities come to faith in Jesus.

Research Themes

Young Adults and Faith

A well-documented trend within the Western world reveals a concerning decline in the number of young adults identifying as Christian or maintaining any form of meaningful contact with the church. This issue has garnered significant attention, as evidenced by a recent headline in a UK national newspaper: “Church in Crisis as Only 2% of Young Adults Identify as C of E” (Sherwood). Further amplifying this concern, research into the Church of England suggests that, barring a move of God, this trend is likely to worsen. The headlines from this research are: “The number of under 16s in the Church of England has fallen by 20 per cent in five years. Three-quarters of Anglican churches have less than five under 16s in their congregation and just over a third have none” (Fowle).

The concerning decline in young adult church involvement is not limited to the UK. James Emery White’s book *Meet Generation Z* sheds light on the dramatic trajectory of the church in North America as well. White highlights that in the 1930s and 1940s individuals identifying with no religion (“nones”) comprised a mere 5% of the population. The data now highlights just how dramatic the decline has been. White says, “The nones are no longer the second largest religious group in the United States” (22). Furthermore, White observes a clear correlation between age and religious affiliation—the younger the demographic, the higher the percentage of “nones.”

Interestingly, White's research reveals that the number of "nones" under the age of 25 in the United Kingdom sits at a staggering 66%, nearly double the rate observed in the USA.

Despite the concerning downward trend in church attendance amongst young adults, some research suggests there is a glimmer of hope. The Christian charity Tearfund's research, conducted towards the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, received significant attention in the UK. *The Guardian* reported on the study's findings, revealing that "a third of young adults aged between 18 and 34 had watched or listened to an online or broadcast religious service, compared with one in five adults over the age of 55" (Sherwood). Furthermore, research on prayer conducted by the Church of England towards the pandemic's conclusion, as reported by the *Church Times*, found that "prayer was more common among younger generations" (Williams). These findings suggest a potential openness to spiritual exploration among young adults, and even an openness to the church and Jesus, despite their declining presence in traditional church settings.

The research presented appears to paint a somewhat conflicting picture. While church attendance amongst young adults continues to decline, there seems to be a concurrent openness to prayer and even engagement with online religious services during the pandemic lockdown. This suggests a potential receptivity to faith among young people, even if traditional churches such as the Church of England are failing to connect.

Perhaps the observed rise in prayer reflects what happens when people are made to focus on the self as prompted by the pandemic's restrictions. Bishop Graham Tomlin highlights prayer as a crucial practice for moving beyond self-absorption. He argues that prayer, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, can reverse this "turned-in nature" (Tomlin 178).

Church planting, armed with best practices for engaging young adults with the Gospel and providing language for spiritual disciplines that young adults appear to crave, could play a key role in bridging this disconnect. The opportunity exists to connect with the openness to faith and prayer young adults are demonstrating, offering a more accessible and relevant expression of the church whilst communicating the gospel of Jesus.

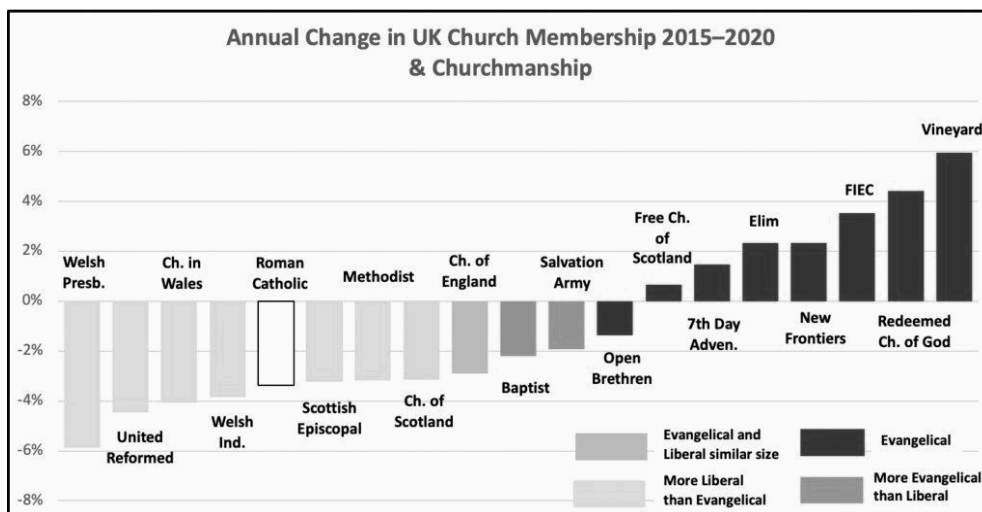
Counter Cultural Church and Young Adults

James Emery White argues that Generation Z represents the "first truly post-Christian generation" (12). This sobering claim, coupled with the rapid cultural shifts impacting young adults, may leave church leaders feeling disoriented and unsure about how to reach young adults with the gospel. However, a sense of despair may be unwarranted. Church history offers valuable lessons for engaging with generations seemingly distant from faith. By studying past movements and adaptations, the contemporary church can glean insights into connecting with young adults who currently have little to no engagement with the church or a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

Kreider, in *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church*, offers a compelling historical perspective amidst concerns regarding dwindling young adult engagement. Despite its initial small size, the early church experienced remarkable growth, even if it was not dramatic. Kreider attributes this success, in part, to the “attractive” faith exhibited by its members, which resonated with those disillusioned with prevailing cultural and religious practices (12). Kreider observes that while Christianity held little relevance for many within society, the church nonetheless witnessed “unstoppable” growth (72). He identifies the Christians’ distinctiveness from surrounding culture as a key factor in this sustained growth (Kreider 99). Kreider elaborates on these distinct characteristics, encompassing areas like sexual ethics, treatment of the poor, business practices, childrearing, the role of women, and divine power. Ultimately, Kreider argues that it was this unique and countercultural way of life that “attracted others” to the church and to faith in Jesus (129).

In essence, Kreider underscores the historical reality of the church thriving precisely when it adopts a countercultural stance which is also its natural stance. Applied to the contemporary context, the church in the UK today arguably finds itself in a more distinctive position than ever before, standing in stark contrast to the dominant cultural and worldview embraced by young adults. Drawing upon this historical precedent, the church can find hope: God can leverage the church’s distinctiveness to draw young adults towards a saving faith in Jesus Christ. However, to do this, the church must retain its distinctiveness.

Kreider’s exploration of the early church’s growth offers valuable insights into the role of distinctive behaviors. He identifies sexual purity as a key characteristic that set the early church apart. Significantly, the early church regarded sexual purity not only as essential for personal holiness but also as a “means of attracting outsiders” (Kreider 102). While acknowledging the limitations of anecdotal evidence, it is tempting to suggest that this principle may hold some relevance even in the contemporary context in England today.



(Hayward, 2022)

The above graph shows a correlation between the theological position of denominations in the UK and their rate of growth and decline. Research conducted by Hayward in 2022 suggests a possible correlation between church growth and adherence to more theologically orthodox ethical and moral positions. Hayward’s observation is that “the data suggests that declining churches are unlikely to survive unless they change their beliefs back to that of their founding fathers.” This pattern of decline was highlighted anecdotally by DeYoung and Kluch when they

wrote in 2008 that the “mainline church bent over backwards to accommodate modernism, and its members have budget crunches and shrinking churches to show for it” (107). This correlation resonates with the historical patterns identified by Kreider, where churches with clear doctrinal stances often stood out from surrounding cultures and had an “attractive” quality about them. This could be an important lesson for church planters wanting to reach young adults today.

James Emery White identifies “sexual fluidity” as a defining characteristic of Generation Z. White elaborates on this concept, suggesting this generation often views sexuality as “set free from any and all restrictions” (48). This cultural reality presents a complex challenge for churches seeking to engage young adults. However, the data is clear, cultural distinctiveness helps reach those without faith.

The path forward may lie in thoughtfully navigating this moral landscape. Church planters must establish distinctive Christian communities that resonate with young adults, without compromising core beliefs, ethics and doctrine. The task lies in discerning how to maintain a clear Christian identity while remaining culturally relevant in order to engage young adults.

Lessons regarding the countercultural nature of church growth can be learned from other parts of the world. Within the Western context, a pervasive narrative suggests the church’s inevitable decline into irrelevance. However, a broader global perspective reveals a thriving and expanding church, even while existing as a “creative minority” (Murray 50). Stuart Murray argues for a critical reevaluation, stating, “we must remove our ‘eurocentric blinkers’ and survey the church through the centuries

and around the globe, we might conclude that situations in which the Christian community enjoys majority status are exceptional” (50).

Examining contexts where Christians represent a minority yet experience significant growth offers valuable insights for the church in England. Murray acknowledges the unique situation in Britain and other Western societies: “what is unusual about the status of the Christian community...is that it is a minority that used to be a majority” (51). Understanding this historical shift and its implications is crucial for effectively engaging this generation. Church planters wanting to reach young adults are now engaging a demographic who are majority unchurched. Learning how other parts of the world have tackled this problem must be an imperative.

Ministering as if societal norms remain unchanged would be a misstep and would not help the church's mission. While the message of the gospel remains unchanged, the context in which it is proclaimed necessitates careful contextualization. Andrew Wilson, in *Spirit and Sacrament*, argues that a church committed to a high view of the sacraments and operating as a sacramental community presents a countercultural stance, offering a “wonderful antidote to the fuzzy, shallow Gnosticism that characterizes western culture today” (87). This perspective resonates with my own experience, suggesting that a renewed emphasis on the sacramental life of the church may hold particular appeal for young adults navigating a culture characterized by impermanence and a search for deeper meaning.

Understanding Young Adults Today

To effectively reach young adults, understanding the factors shaping their generation is crucial. Distinct characteristics differentiate each generation, and Generation Z is no exception. James Emery White highlights several key markers: ‘recession-marked,’ ‘Wi-Fi enabled,’ ‘multiracial,’ ‘sexually fluid,’ and ‘post-Christian’ (Chapter 2). Furthermore, considering the recent COVID-19 pandemic and its ongoing effects additional markers including isolation, loneliness, and disconnection can be added to this list. For example, Kung found that one in four adults felt lonely during the COVID-19 lockdowns, but this figure was almost double among young adults. She wrote that the “young experienced the largest increase in loneliness at the start of the pandemic compared with other age groups” (Kung). Comprehending these markers and experiences is essential for developing strategies to connect with and engage young adults.

Large corporations invest heavily in researching young adult attitudes and behaviors to effectively build brands to market at them. This information could be invaluable for church planters, as it allows them to identify cultural trends and markers. By understanding these trends, church planters can contextualize the timeless message of the Gospel and communicate it in a way that resonates with young adults.

In their book *Marketing to Gen Z*, Jeff Fromm and Angie Read emphasize the importance of brand participation in current cultural conversations (213). They want brands to ask the question: Is this brand culturally relevant? This concept is equally pertinent to the church. By being aware of the cultural conversations happening within

various social circles, church planters can tailor their outreach to address the issues and questions young people are grappling with today, rather than focusing on topics young people may no longer find relevant.

Building on the concept of cultural awareness, Fromm and Read's subsequent question delves into emotional connection (216). They argue that establishing a genuine bond with consumers hinges on the brand's ability to demonstrate an understanding of their audience's needs and desires. Furthermore, they suggest that creating opportunities for self-exploration creates connection for young adults with brands. In the context of church planting, the Gospel message offers a powerful parallel. The Bible assures us that God possesses intimate knowledge of every individual, "even the number of hairs on your head" (Matt. 10.30). The Gospel itself becomes the ultimate path to self-exploration and understanding. Through faith in Jesus Christ, one discovers not only their true identity but also the most profound emotional connection imaginable - connection with God.

Following the themes of cultural awareness and emotional connection, Fromm and Read's next inquiry centers on innovation (216). They identify agility, creativity, and responsiveness as hallmarks of successful brands. These qualities are equally important for the church. However, a critical distinction must be made between the way a brand innovates and the way the church should innovate. The church should not innovate by altering the message and truth of the Gospel. The decline in church attendance observed in data discussed earlier highlights the pitfalls of this approach. The emphasis should lie on innovating how the Gospel is presented and how the

church engages with its mission and community. By embracing fresh approaches without compromising core beliefs, the church can better connect with young adults in today's ever-evolving cultural landscape.

Examining the concept of trust, Fromm and Read ask, "Is my Brand Remarkably Consistent?" (217). They identify transparency, authenticity, and altruism as hallmarks of trustworthy brands (Fromm and Read 217). These qualities hold significant value for church planters seeking to connect with young adults. Recent church failings in areas like safeguarding have unfortunately cast doubt on the level of transparency and authenticity young adults perceive within the church. For this generation, who highly value these virtues, the church must strive to exemplify them at every level. Jonathan Pokluda, in *Welcoming the Future Church*, emphasizes this point by asking the question: "Is the leadership in your church vulnerable, authentic, and transparent? Are you? If not, that's a major reason why you won't be able to reach young adults" (24). He further argues that a lack of authenticity in the life of a church leader can be a significant barrier to young adults engaging with church. Authenticity and transparency are crucial for building trust with young adults.

Fromm and Read's penultimate question dives into the concept of purpose, asking "Does my Brand Add Good to Society?" (217). They highlight Generation Z's preference for brands that demonstrably improve people's lives. This concept resonates with a personal anecdote: when our church's staff debated the potential coffee suppliers we could use for our Sunday coffee, the younger members passionately advocated for a specialty coffee brand known for ethical practices

throughout the coffee supply chain. Nothing less would suffice for them. Fromm and Read's research offers valuable takeaways for the church. Are we actively working to improve the lives of those in our local communities, not just preaching the Gospel verbally? Failure to demonstrate a tangible impact may alienate young adults from both the gospel and the church.

Examining accessibility, the final question Fromm and Read ask is: "Is my brand hyper useful and hyper convenient?" (217). The global pandemic has underscored the importance of accessibility for the church, which now maintains a significantly larger digital presence. While the core message of the Gospel calls for self-denial (Rom. 6.4) and may not inherently be considered "useful" or "convenient," maximizing accessibility to the church and its message remains crucial.

By leveraging marketing principles gleaned from valuable research, church planters can effectively engage young adults in today's cultural landscape. Fromm and Read's questions offer a framework for contextualizing the Gospel and communicating it in a way that resonates with young adults. Focusing on cultural conversations, emotional connection, innovation, consistency, purpose, and accessibility empowers church planters to reach younger demographics and make a meaningful impact on their lives. Through this research the church can find new ways to invite more individuals to experience the transformative power of the gospel of Jesus.

While some find value in applying marketing principles gleaned from corporate research to engage young adults, others would caution from simply learning

about young adults. DeVries and Pontier, in their work *Sustainable Young Adult Ministry*, outline several missteps commonly made by ministers seeking to connect with young adults. Their most significant critique lies in the very act of “learning about young adults” (DeVries & Pontier 27). They argue that the rapidly evolving nature of Generation Z, coupled with the inherent diversity within this age group, renders such efforts as not useful in and of itself. Instead, DeVries and Pontier advocate for a relational approach, stating, “It’s no longer realistic to simply point the ship vaguely in the direction of young adult ministry. We need an elegant, agile solution capable of making constant adjustments based on changing conditions. And one of the first adjustments must be to stop learning about young adults and actually build relationships with them” (27). In essence, they argue for prioritizing relationship building over chasing the latest trends in how to engage young adults.

It may well be enough not just to build relationships with young adults, they need releasing into leadership because of these relationships. Calver and Calver write that it “is absolutely vital that we invest and build into the younger generation” (216). This is something that Seversen also highlights when she writes that young adults need to feel included, involved and invested in and that this must happen immediately “within a few weeks or months of their initial church visit” (119). She argues that this does not just help young adults feel involved in church but can actually help young adults convert to Christ. She concludes, “As the church invests in young adults who become involved and find meaningful places...of leadership, those young adults receive more and more benefit, and their churches become more and more attractive”

(Seversen 119). Therefore, leadership development becomes a key strategy for retaining, attracting and even converting young adults.

DeVries and Pontier state that relationship-building is fundamental. It is also the case that spending time with young adults can also reveal valuable insights that align with marketing research by Fromm and Read. Understanding the unique characteristics, values, and needs of Generation Z is crucial for effective outreach. This generation, having grown up with rapid technological advancements, increasing diversity, and significant cultural shifts, possesses a distinct worldview and set of expectations. By acknowledging these unique experiences, the church can adapt its message and approach to resonate with young adults while also prioritizing relationships.

One thing that is clear is that young adults desire to have a positive impact on the world and want to be able to influence the world around them. When translating this to the church context, some experts in the field suggest that this means empowering young adults to lead in the church space. John Schroeder, the author of a book on creating and sustaining young adult ministry, says that “young adults want to take part in making decisions that affect them” (Chapter 1).

While churches should take into account the needs and preferences of Generation Z, this is not the ultimate goal. The aim is to preach the gospel and fulfill the Great Commission by planting churches. Therefore, churches should focus on sharing the message of Christ in a way that resonates with young adults without changing the message.

In her work *Not Done Yet*, Beth Severson researched churches that had been successful in her denomination at reaching young adults. She writes that one of the major pieces of finding from her research was the following:

“Churches in my study maintained connections with the broader culture and related to those within it while also cultivating deep commitment to Christ, Christian virtue, attentiveness to the Spirit, and missional passion. My findings suggest that the degree to which churches engage American society while holding onto orthodox distinctiveness is directly related to their ability to practice relational evangelism among emerging adults.”(Seversen 241)

Severen’s research aligns with the insights gleaned from this literature review, churches effective in engaging young adults possess a dual vocation, they can create cultural connection and the preservation of Christian identity and the message of the gospel.

Seversen further notes:

“I have come to believe that churches that are both clearly distinctive and engaged with non-Christian outgroups are most able to translate the gospel to non-Christian young adults, so they are more likely to see new faith commitments. Churches may live in tension with some outgroups for legitimate reasons of moral or ideological disagreement, but they are able to stay engaged, not separated.” (244)

Severson identifies a critical danger for churches neglecting both cultural engagement and orthodox distinctiveness. This combination results in “disintegration,” (Seversen 245) a state where the church loses its unique identity and

struggles to maintain its presence in culture. Conversely, churches prioritizing cultural engagement without a strong foundation in Christian distinctiveness suffer from “cultural non-distinction” (Severson 245). These churches essentially blend into the cultural background, offering little that sets them apart. Severson highlights the consequence of this, noting a decline in “attractiveness and numbers” (246).

On the other hand, churches emphasizing orthodox distinctiveness but neglecting cultural engagement become “enclaves” (Severson, 245). These churches isolate themselves from the surrounding culture, creating a barrier for non-Christians seeking to explore the faith. Severson emphasizes this point by stating the absence of an “on-ramp” for newcomers.

In contrast, Severson identifies churches achieving growth and attracting young adults as those characterized by “engaged orthodoxy” (245). These churches strike a vital balance between cultural relevance and unwavering commitment to the unchanging message of the scriptures. DeYoung and Kluck state that “young people will give their lives for an exclamation point, but they will not give their lives for a question mark” (127). In other words, they believe that young people will be excited about joining the church when they see the beauty of the gospel that demands them to give their whole lives. This finding by Severson resonates with the insights gleaned from the broader literature review.

In her research Severson used a test case of churches approach towards one the ‘hot potato’ issues of the day to test her research findings: the way that churches interact with issues relating to LGBTQI+ issues. She said she found that “Pastors who

do preach on human sexuality explain they... intentionally engage publicly with homosexuality along with other issues of concern to young adults. They find that particular age group appreciates this honest approach when it's done with humility and respect" (Seversen 256). Seversen states that churches who are holding out a different message to that of the rest of culture are defined by an absence of "any leanings toward separatism, isolationism, paranoia, factionalism, or anti-intellectualism" (Seversen 259).

Seversen's research suggests a crucial balance for churches seeking to engage young adults. This equilibrium lies between maintaining their theological distinctiveness and actively participating and engaging in contemporary culture. Churches achieving this balance are better placed to cultivate relational evangelism within the young adult demographic. Furthermore, Seversen's work suggests that approaching sensitive topics, such as human sexuality, with a foundation of humility, respect, and truth can resonate with young adults. Seversen's study reveals the significance of churches engaging with culture while preserving their core beliefs in the gospel—a strategy she says creates connection and retention among young adults. DeYoung and Kluck highlight this when they argue for churches to be consistent and decisive when talking about issues that may be controversial due to difficult doctrines. They comment that young adults are "tired of indecision and inconsistency" (DeYoung and Kluck 116).

Given Seversen's North American context, it is important to explore the applicability of her findings to the practice of church planting in the UK. Christian

Selvaratnam, a prominent church planter practitioner in England, contends in his work on church planting that newly established churches possess a distinct advantage in reaching demographics beyond the scope of existing congregations (13). This research seeks to highlight the specific practices employed by thriving church plants that enable them to connect with those young adults currently outside the reach of traditional churches.

Research Design Literature

The next step in this project developed the research methods that would allow the researcher to build on the literature review to discover best practice for reaching young adults in church planting that is happening right now in the Church of England. The research tools that were deployed provided a way to test the themes that had emerged within the literature review and to press deeper into the specific context of the Anglican church and reaching young adults with the gospel today. The challenge was to design research that truly revealed what best practice currently exists without assuming what best practice would be from the researchers assumptions, experience or reading.

When exploring a relevant survey tool for the research, Tim Sensing's book *Qualitative Research* was particularly helpful. He notes that a questionnaire "is a paper and pencil instrument for doing an interview" and that "open-ended questions will be most used in DMin projects" (Sensing 113). He offers five different question types that can be used, and these were all explored so that the best data could be gathered.

Focus groups were also used as part of this research. Sensing writes that through “group interaction, data and insights are generated that are related to a particular theme imposed by a researcher and enriched by the group’s interactive discussion” (120). The reason that focus groups were employed in this research is that the “synergy of the group will often provide richer data and if each person in the group had been interviewed separately” (Sensing 120). The focus groups took place online, and so Sensing’s suggestion (based on the work of Mack) to “log any additional information about the focus group while it is still in the memory” was noted (Sensing 124). This included observing nonverbal communication.

The leaders of the church plants were interviewed, and this allowed “people to describe their situations and put words to their interior lives, personal feelings, opinions, and experiences that otherwise are not available to the researcher by observation” (Sensing 103). The interviews also helped the researcher drill down into the main themes brought up by the literature review and reached conclusions not available through the other research tools. Sensing’s seven prompts and probing questions were deployed to encourage maximum data from the open-ended questions so best practices for church planters could really be pursued (Sensing 110).

Summary of Literature

The picture that emerged from the literature review was one of hope for church planters who are looking to reach young adults with the good news of Jesus today.

Cultural Distinction

The review of the literature highlighted that cultural distinctiveness is a central theme of the project's research. The biblical, theological, church history and current practice all highlighted in some way the importance of the gospel propelling churches towards being different to culture to offer distinctiveness. Even though this is challenging for churches, it has been a marker of the people of God since the beginning and is actually a reason why churches grow and reach the culture around them.

Ecclesiology

The literature review revealed that an understanding of what church is is essential to honing best practice in church planting that reaches young adults. A clear definition of what church is helps planters understand exactly what it is they are planting. It also helps frame the community and what it does and does not do in reaching young adults. The researcher wanted to understand if a strong or particularly definition of church was important in establishing healthy churches that could reach young adults.

Sacramentalism

It was established that the sacraments are essential to what it means to be Anglican and to be the church, and so the researcher pursued this in the research. Contemporary church leaders who have had some success in reaching young adults with the gospel have commented on regular sacramental practices and them being a means by which young adults have engaged with the church. The researcher wanted to

pursue to what extent this was the case in the context of reaching young adults in England.

Evangelism

It is no surprise that evangelism is an important theme that emerged from the review of the literature. The researcher explored to what extent church planting was an effective means of evangelism. Lots of research has shown that church planting catalyzes church growth and that newer churches reach new people groups quicker than more established churches. The researcher wanted to pursue whether this was also the case with churches wanting to reach young adults in England.

Biblical Orthodoxy and Cultural Engagement

Some of the literature pointed to the fact that biblical orthodoxy caused churches that were reaching young adults to grow, even in the face of a completely different culture with different worldviews to the bible. Work by Beth Seversten revealed that even in the most contentious debates (such as those around sexuality) where churches taught orthodox biblical truth, those churches tended to grow if they were engaging sensitively with the culture. This also needed to be pursued in the research.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY FOR THE PROJECT

Overview of the Chapter

This chapter describes the research methodology used for this doctoral project. The

Researcher shall review the nature and purpose of the project and then the three research questions are stated alongside the instrumentation used to address each of the research questions. The ministry context(s) are then described followed by a description of the participants, ethical considerations considered and how the data was collected and analyzed.

Nature and Purpose of the Project

The purpose of this research was to identify best practices for planting churches that reach young adults with the Gospel by consulting historic Christianity, current clergy in the Church of England, and young adults active in Anglican churches. The Church of England is facing a crisis with declining attendance and an aging membership. The House of Bishops of the Church of England have produced a paper on Church Planting called ‘Church Planting and the Mission of the Church’. In this paper they recognize that Church Planting is one of the key ways that the “Church of England seeks to share in the apostolic mission by proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ and drawing people into the adventure of discipleship” (House of Bishops 1). Recognizing the need to reach more people with the good news of Jesus, the Bishops “welcome planting new churches as a way of sharing in the apostolic mission by bringing more people in England to faith in Christ and participation in the life of the Church” (House

of Bishops 3). The Church of England has been so committed to this that it has invested millions of pounds in Church Planting over the past few years through *Strategic Development Funding* and has encouraged the planting of many new churches. Amongst the churches that have been planted, many resource churches have been planted that act as a catalyst for church planting in a diocese and are planted to reach people that the Church of England is not currently reaching. The biggest missing demographic from the Church of England is young adults and students. According to the latest data from the Bishop of Islington, the Church of England's Bishop for Church Planting, there are now 111 designated Resource Churches in the Church of England. This project will look at those Resource Churches that are located in population centers with large numbers of young adults and students and assess what best practice can be gleaned from these churches as they reach young people with the good news of Jesus.

Church Planting anywhere and in any context is hard work. Church planting in places where there are large numbers of young adults is going to be even more challenging. One of the challenges for church planters in the Church of England is to establish how to plant churches that are going to be effective at reaching young adults with the good news of Jesus. Establishing what the challenges are to reaching young people with the good news of Jesus as well as identifying the opportunities for best practice is an important area of research so that churches can be planted equipped with practices and knowledge for reaching young adults with the gospel.

The research questions of this project were designed to find out what the current reality is amongst churches in the Church of England with regards to reaching young adults. Leaders of churches with young adults and the young people themselves were then consulted as to what they think the primary challenges are to the gospel reaching this demographic. Finally, leaders of church plants that are effective at reaching young adults were consulted to begin to establish what the best practices may be for church planting in a way that will reach young adults.

Research Questions

RQ #1. What is the Church of England doing currently that is effective (or not) in reaching young adults?

The purpose of this question was to establish what leaders within the Church of England believe the church is currently doing to reach young adults with the good news of Jesus. To collect data for this question key leaders within the Church of England were questioned by a survey as to what they currently saw happening within the denomination that was either working or not working with regards to seeing young adults come to faith and join the church. Questions 1-2 addressed the credibility of the interviewee, questions 3-5 addressed knowledge and questions 6-9 addressed attitudes within the Church of England leadership regarding reaching young adults and church planting as a vehicle for doing so. Question 10 gave an opportunity for anything else to be addressed by those who were being surveyed. This survey led to quantitative

data that could be used for what denominational leaders currently think is working and not working for the Church of England in reaching young adults.

RQ #2. What do leaders in the Church of England and young adults attending these churches identify as primary challenges to reaching young adults with the gospel?

If churches are going to be planted that reach young adults, then it is important to address the challenges of reaching young adults with the good news of Jesus. This question gave leaders of young adults and the young adults themselves the opportunity to contribute towards why the Church of England is not doing particularly well at engaging young adults. In order to establish what some of these challenges were, a focus group was convened of young adult leaders and young adults. This, along with the literature review helps us explore what the primary challenges for church planters are as they think about planting churches that will reach young adults.

RQ #3. What are best practices from new church plants in the Church of England to reach young adults?

Over the past few years the Church of England has planted a number of Resource Churches that have been planted with the aim of reaching young adults. Church planters with many young adults in their churches were asked in a researcher-designed semi-structured interview what ministry practices they found were helpful in reaching young adults.

Ministry Contexts

This project seeks to understand what best practice may be for reaching young adults with the good news of Jesus, particularly in the context of church planting. In order to understand what new church plants in the Church of England may need to do in order to reach young adults it is important to speak to denominational leaders, young adults and church planters about what they sense the challenges and opportunities may be.

Church planting is not new to the Church of England; every single one of its churches, chapels and other places of worship were planted once. What is new is the current cultural moment that we find ourselves in which so few churches are being planted in the Church of England and so few young adults are engaging with the life of the Church of England. The Church of England is at a pivotal moment and has been making some significant interventions. One of the most prominent has been the planting and designating of Resource Churches.

Resource churches tend to have a much younger congregation than the average Church of England congregation. In the researchers' own church, the average age is around 24 years old, while over a third of an average Church of England congregation is over the age of 70. Most Resource Churches come from the evangelical tradition in the Church of England, and this is important to note in terms of the ministry context that has been researched in this paper.

The majority of Resource Churches are located in town and city centers, and a large number of them are in proximity to university students. So, these churches are

therefore located where there are large numbers of Young Adults. As we have already explored in this paper, this means that churches that are reaching young adults are doing so in very difficult ministry contexts; they are trying to reach the largest unreached age demographic in the United Kingdom. However, as the literature review explored, this generation is also open to spirituality and to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Participants

Criteria for Selection

In order to research what the Church of England was currently doing that was proving effective or not in reaching young adults, denominational leaders were selected. This included two bishops, two senior leaders involved in church planting strategy in the Church of England and two leaders with responsibility for church planting in networks that exist in the Church of England. Surveying six senior leaders ensured that there was a broad spectrum of senior leaders who were consulted so that the picture as to what current practice is was not skewed by geographical location.

The participants involved in Research Question Two came from six churches that have been either planted and are reaching large numbers of young adults or are churches that have been designated as Resource Churches and are planting other churches that will reach young adults. These six churches were identified in consultation with bishops and senior leaders responsible for church planting training and strategy as they are best placed to advise as to which churches are effective in reaching young adults. The participants came from the staff with responsibility for work with young adults and three young adults from each church. The six churches

were spread around the nation to ensure that general challenges could be identified rather than challenges that may have just been geographical or context dependent.

For Research Question Three, the six leaders who are leading the churches identified for question two were interviewed as to what their experience was in identifying best practices when planting churches that reached young adults.

Description of Participants

The participants for this research were denominational leaders who have responsibility for ensuring that the church's vision to grow younger is enacted upon. The six churches that were selected were Resource Churches that had specifically been designated as Resource Churches by the Church of England nationally. This was to avoid churches self-identifying as churches that are reaching young adults. The young adult leaders were leaders in churches who held specific ministry responsibility for young adults and young adults themselves. The young adults who took part in the research were selected by the leaders of the young adult ministry and were aged between 18-35. The young adult leaders were selected by the senior leader as the nominated ministry lead for young adults within the church. They were also asked to supply a diverse group of young adults such as a mix of gender and ethnic backgrounds. The church leaders were the senior leaders of the six churches identified for research in the project.

Ethical Considerations

The wellbeing, rights and privacy of the participants were considered throughout the project. The training course "Protecting Human Research Participants" was completed by the researcher before any research happened so that best practice

would be followed at all times. Approval was received from the Institutional Review Board at Asbury Theological Seminary. Participants were all asked to give their consent to being involved in the project and were told that they could withdraw at any time. Consent was required in the form of “informed consent”, and this included an overview description of the project. Participants and churches were anonymised in the research, and all data that was collected was held on a password protected Google Drive to ensure confidentiality.

Instrumentation

This project is a qualitative pre-intervention research project. The instrumentation was designed in such a way that would draw out current practice from denominational leaders, challenges from young adults and young adult leaders and best practice from the senior leaders of church plants that have been designated as having a brief to reach young adults and students. Three different instruments were used for the purposes of this project. They were a survey that followed specific questions, a focus group and a semi-structured interview.

The first instrument was a researcher designed survey that followed specific questions and received data about what denominational leaders thought was currently happening in the Church of England with regards to reaching young adults (see appendix). This provided data for Research Question 1 primarily, but also provided some data for Research Questions 2 and 3.

The second instrument was a researcher designed focus group. Participants were asked twelve questions to ascertain what the primary challenges were to reaching young adults (see appendix). This provided qualitative data for Research Question 2.

The third instrument was a semi-structured interview with the senior leaders of the six churches that had been identified as successfully reaching young adults (see Appendix A). The purpose of this instrument was to gather data for what general best practices may be for church planters as they seek to plant churches that reach young people. This provided quantitative data for Research Question 3 and some data for Research Question 1.

Expert Review

The questions that were used during the research were reviewed by Professor Chris Kiesling and the IRB. Professor Kiesling has significant experience working with young adults, albeit in a different geographical context.

Reliability & Validity of Project Design

Three different instruments were used to gather data as a number of different instruments are going to provide more reliable results and data that can be explored more deeply than if just one instrument was used. The survey sought to capture the current picture from denomination leaders while the semi-structured interviews sought to gather data for what the best practice might be from leading practitioners of church planters who are reaching young adults. The focus groups provided more space for young adults to contribute to the research. Each instrument focused on one research

question but sometimes provided data that contributed to the other research questions. For example, while denominational leaders may not be church planting practitioners, they are often aware of what is working in regard to reaching young adults.

For consistency and reliability, everybody surveyed was asked the same questions, and the semi-structured interviews all took place over the same amount of time. The focus groups were more free form, and this allowed the young adults to clarify their responses and to have a real voice in the research. The questions that were used during the research were reviewed by Professor Chris Kiesling and the IRB. Professor Kiesling has significant experience working with young adults, albeit in a different geographical context.

If one were to want to find out current practice, challenges and best practice for church planting with young adults then the instruments could be replicated in any context in any denomination, provided there were churches that were engaging with and reaching young adults. The significance of this research and the data that arises from it is that it should help church planters identify the challenges in reaching young adults and the best practice from leading practitioners so as to enable church planters to plant churches that will reach young people.

Data Collection

The research was collected over a period of three months. At the start of the research period, e-mails were sent to the six denominational leaders and to the six churches identified and asked them if they would like to participate in the project. Once the

survey and focus groups had been completed, semi structured interviews with the senior leaders took place.

The semi-structured interviews and focus groups took place on a video conferencing platform and were recorded so that the recordings could be reviewed. A transcript of the video recordings was also generated. During the focus groups and the semi-structured interviews, a “neutral stance” was adopted so that bias from the researcher were not projected onto the participants (Sensing 92). I was acutely aware that I am leading a church with large numbers of young adults and did not want to project any of my own opinions or bias into the research and data collection. Despite this neutral stance, it is important to acknowledge that there yet remains the possibility of a social desirability effect, namely that respondents could have answered questions in a way that they deemed consciously or unconsciously to win favor with the researcher.

Data Analysis

The research gathered a wealth of information, and the data was analyzed to see what common areas of overlap were repeated from each of the instruments, areas of disagreement and where any potential realities were missing. In his book *Qualitative Research*, Tim Sensing offers a method for “triangulating the data” that is collected (197). He suggests that one “way to organize the data is to discuss the areas of significant overlap as themes or patterns, the areas of disagreement as slippage and the “realities” not represented in your findings as silences” (Sensing 197). Data was

triangulated in this way.

The six Senior Church Leaders were asked to comment on whether they also noted as a challenge the challenges that their young adult leaders and young adults presented in the focus groups. Where there was agreement or difference, this was noted by the researcher. They were also asked to comment on what they thought was currently happening in the Church of England regarding reaching young adults. Again, areas of agreement and difference were noted.

CHAPTER 4

EVIDENCE FOR THE PROJECT

Overview of the Chapter

The Church of England has recently invested large sums of resources, financial and human, into planting new churches that will reach people who are not currently being reached by the denomination, particularly young adults. In light of the investment that has been poured into church planting, research was carried out to find out patterns of best practice in church plants that are reaching young adults. Each research question is answered with a description of evidence. The participants involved in the study are described, and the evidence for each research question is given. As this research is qualitative, describing the evidence for the findings required descriptive language. There are extensive quotes from interview transcripts that were collected during the research. The study's purpose was to identify best practices for planting churches that reach young adults, and the six major research findings are highlighted at the end of the chapter.

Participants

This study's participants included six denominational leaders involved in senior leadership in the Church of England. All the denominational leaders were aged between forty and sixty. Thirty-four Young Adults were involved in focus groups. These young adults were all over the age of eighteen and under the age of thirty-five as this is the Church of England's definition of a young adult. Nineteen were women and fifteen were men. There was ethnic diversity represented in each focus group and

in every single focus group was at least one person who had become a Christian through the church being researched. Of the thirty-four young adults, one from each focus group had been identified by the leader of the church as a key leader in a young adult ministry in the church. There were also six senior leaders of the churches selected for the research. These were the church planters who had planted the church, or they were the designated Resource Church leader (Resource Church leaders are designated by their bishops, their denominational leaders). Two of the senior leaders were in their twenties, two in their thirties and two in their forties.

Research Question #1: Description of Evidence

Research Question #1: What is the Church of England doing currently that is effective (or not) in reaching young adults?

Church Planting

The survey that was sent out to denominational leaders asked them to rate how effective church planting in the Church of England is for reaching young adults. The scale was from 1—4 with 1 being not effective and 4 being very effective. Just over eighty-three percent of the denominational leaders stated that Church planting was very effective, ranking their answer as a 4. Just under 17 % of denominational leaders gave an answer of a 3. No one answered that question lower than a 3.

When asked to describe particular initiatives, churches or new church plants that they believe are effective in reaching young adults, denominational leaders highlighted the importance of the planting of Resource Churches. All but one of the denominational leaders surveyed mentioned that this initiative, with its focus on

reaching young adults, had been an effective strategy for reaching young adults. The one respondent who did not mention the phrase ‘Resource Church’ in their answer named a Resource Church by name as an example of an initiative that has been effective. One respondent wrote: “Resource Churches in the Church of England have a church planting mandate and many of the resource churches are attracting young adults.” Another still made an even more bold claim that:

Resource churches planted in city centers are universally good at reaching young adults. This is partly because young adults naturally travel for shopping, entertainment and work and they are not bound by geographical ties. They also gravitate towards similar demographic groups. RCs (Resource Churches) provide for all these and they have a natural energy because of this.

Another respondent wrote that:

Resource Churches in the Church of England have a church planting mandate and many of the resource churches are attracting young adults. Their demographic is much younger than the average parish church. They are often led by ‘younger’ ordained and lay leaders who are more attune to the needs, belief systems, modus operandi of young adults. They are set up to offer a worship offering that appeals to this generation.

Among the respondents there was a near universal consensus that the development of Resource Churches had contributed to the Church of England’s effectiveness in

reaching more young adults.

Intentional Focus on Young Adults

Another finding from the research was that having an intentional focus on young adults was an effective strategy for reaching more young adults with the gospel. The majority of England's young adults live in city centers, and denominational leaders who responded to the survey highlighted that focussing on these areas where young adults live and work has been an effective strategy for reaching more young adults with the gospel. All the respondents named city center churches either generally or specifically by name as an example of what the Church of England is currently doing that is effective. One respondent wrote that a "focussed approach in reaching this demographic" has been bearing fruit. One told the story of a church that started in one city and has since planted three new churches in London and that these churches have seen sustained growth. The reason, the respondent said, is that "Both of these contexts are urban city centers and these are the areas to target."

Leadership Empowerment of Young Adults

Denominational leaders highlighted the importance of giving leadership to young adults as something that has been effective at reaching young adults. Churches that empower young adults to take on leadership roles are particularly effective. When young adults see people like them leading, they are more likely to feel a sense of belonging and ownership within the church community. One bishop noted that The key to one new church they had seen flourish with young adults "was the gifted

leadership of (the church leader) as a young adult who shaped culture and innovated in order to reach young adults and built leadership teams of young adults.” Another respondent noted that where churches are growing with young adults it is because “Young adults are trusted with leadership responsibility in these churches.” Other respondents made direct references to “developing leaders” while one stated that effective church plants “are often led by ‘younger’ ordained and lay leaders who are more attune to the needs, belief systems, modus operandi of young adults.”

This theme continued in the focus groups of young adults. Four out of the six focus groups of young adults that were convened from the six churches identified as being some examples of best practice also mentioned leadership development as something that has been effective at helping their church be a place where young adults feel they can belong. The specific way in which leadership was given away to young people would look slightly different in each place. In some churches it was about joining ministry teams such as the student team. In another church young adults were trusted to lead life groups. In another church a young adult commented that because the leadership of the whole church was made up predominantly of young adults and that this had helped young adults see themselves ‘represented in the leadership’. One young adult from a fourth church said succinctly: “I would also add that what (the church) does really well is invest in young leaders. There is often a young adult or a student hosting a gathering, an event. We get feedback, encouragement, mentoring, and support. I have had the privilege of leading services, a

life group, leading in the kids' work. That makes it a place where we want to come and belong.”

Focus on Evangelism and Mission

Denominational leaders commented when surveyed about the importance of having a deliberate focus on mission and evangelism. One denominational leader stated:

All resources churches, and many church plants are effective at evangelizing and discipling young adults. I suspect that dynamic community life, meaningful engagement, and the opportunity to be part of adventurous Christian projects are similar reasons why church plants, in particular, are effective at reaching young adults.

Another stated that effective church plants are “led by missional leaders.” Another denominational leader made a direct contrast between what he termed ‘legacy churches’ and ‘church plants’ when he said:

“Most church plants are significantly more effective than legacy churches at (1) evangelising and discipling younger generations, (2) developing young vocations and (3) discerning and leading change in church culture and practice that is contextually-responsive to emerging cultures.”

Research Question #2: What do leaders in the Church of England and young adults attending these churches identify as primary challenges to reaching young adults with the gospel?

The Church is Perceived as Irrelevant

All six respondents from a denominational leadership perspective commented that a primary challenge to reaching young adults with the gospel was that the church has a perception problem. One mentioned that “the church has been slow to adapt to significant changes in society.” Another commented that “churches have become ‘old’ and largely irrelevant to most young adults. The church has lost sight of those that it is not reaching, which is many people groups, of which young adults is one group.” The third respondent noted that “institutional rigidity that works from the assumption that the current pattern of church is the proper one and proposals to change things in order to connect with young adults are met with resistance and suspicion.” The fourth said that the Church of England “is seen as irrelevant, something their (young adults) grandparents did.” The fifth stated that “it can get stuck in its desire to preserve its traditions and buildings and this stops it from innovating and moving forwards.” Respondent number six said that a lack of “engagement with culture, especially youth culture, and to listen” as well as a “lack of evangelistic confidence and inability to translate into contemporary language.”

Young adults themselves also highlighted this problem in the focus groups. Every single focus group made a direct reference to the perceived irrelevance of the Church of England. One young adult in a focus group said, “It’s these preconceived ideas and judgments about what church is like that hinder them from engaging. Many of my friends are surprised to learn that young people do go to church and that it can be enjoyable.” Another young adult from a different church, in their focus group told

the following story about a friend of theirs who once came to church:

Personally, I often hear from people who struggle to realize that their childhood or school experiences of church may not reflect all churches. For instance, I recently spoke with a student who attended church as a child but despised it, eventually ceasing to attend altogether. They believe the church is irrelevant. However, during a visit home at Christmas, they accompanied their grandmother to church and found the experience immensely enjoyable. Despite this positive encounter, they remain hesitant to seek out a local church in Sheffield due to their negative childhood church experiences.

Another respondent still in another church commented that their friends “think of the church as irrelevant with organs and hymns, so getting people through the door to show them it is something else, something relevant, that is really difficult.” The theme of the irrelevance of the church was a dominant emerging theme as a barrier to young adults attending church from both the survey and focus group respondents.

Lack of Clarity on Theological Issues and the Bible

The data revealed a significant difference in how young adults perceive the challenge of connecting with their peers compared to how denominational leaders perceive the challenge of reaching young adults. Only one denominational leader made reference to a lack of biblical teaching being a challenge when they stated that “Churches have failed to teach their congregations to disciple others in the Christian

faith.” No other denominational referenced teaching (or lack of) as a challenge at all. In stark contrast every single focus group mentioned that clarity on theological and ethical issues would be a help to reaching young adults and that a lack of clarity is a barrier and challenge to reaching young adults.

One young adult in a focus group, when asked what they perceived to be the main challenges of young adults connecting with the church commented: “It would be so helpful if [church name] talked about sexuality more openly.” And another young adult in the focus group joined in stating: “Yeah, I think it would pique people’s interest. It’s one of those issues that many people grapple with, whether they’re Christians or not.” In another church a young adult stated that: “I believe clarity is kindness, you know? Like, just point people to Jesus, and a lot of the other stuff kind of falls into place. Whether it’s racial justice, environmental issues, or sexuality, if we focus on what Jesus teaches in the scriptures, we’ll find our way.” One young adult summed up what was being said in all the focus groups when they stated,

“I believe that young adults are eager for clear, honest discussions, especially on sensitive topics like sexuality. Despite potential pushback, they want the truth, and they want it directly addressed.”

Every focus group emphasized the importance of clarity on these issues for engaging young adults. Notably, half even made direct remarks about their longing for churches to increase their teaching on controversial subjects to provide further clarity. One young adult stated:

Having these conversations about identity, especially when you're LGBTQIA+, are super important. Like, in music college, at least half (probably more) were LGBTQI, and all my gay friends say they avoid church because of feeling judged. But I don't think that's always true! Like others said, it definitely depends on the church's stance. I wish I could invite them along, but they always say no. Still, I'd love them to have these conversations at church!

The data exposes a significant discrepancy: denominational leaders appear unaware of the church's perceived lack of clarity on issues like sexuality, which young adults explicitly identify as a major challenge for the church.

Lack of Young Adults in Leadership Roles

The research suggests a lack of leadership opportunities for young adults as a significant barrier to their engagement with the Church of England. Young adults themselves expressed a desire for empowerment through leadership roles, and denominational leaders acknowledged the issue, noting both a lack of representation and the challenges faced by churches trying to engage young adults within the current structure. Some leaders even described the existing system as rigid and resistant to change, hindering efforts to connect with younger generations.

One denominational leader wrote that "Many [young adults] fail to see the relevance of the Church of England to their lives. They don't see 'people like them' in

visible leadership roles and so don't aspire to be more engaged." One denominational leader even wrote that the churches that are engaging young adults have to work around the Church of England system in order to fulfill their task. They wrote:

Institutional rigidity that works from the assumption that the current pattern of church is the proper one and proposals to change things in order to connect with young adults are met with resistance and suspicion. The processes to empower young adults to lead and take responsibility are slow and based on delivering the 'proper' way of doing church and so any churches that are successful in connecting with young adults are often breaking Church of England protocols or having to work around them.

Another denominational leader wrote that "Most of the leadership and money is held by people who are too far removed from younger generations." A further denominational leader wrote that there is "Not sufficient emphasis on discipleship and leadership development of young" and highlighted this as a reason the Church of England, on the whole, struggles to engage with and reach young adults. Focus groups revealed a strong desire among young adults for opportunities to influence and lead within the church. This desire finds expression in the best-practice centers, where young adults are actively involved in leadership roles.

Research Question #3: What are best practices from new church plants in the Church of England to reach young adults?

Emphasis on Prayer

Interviews with church planters revealed a striking emphasis on prayer as a key practice in reaching young adults. Every interviewee mentioned prayer, and one leader spoke about it a remarkable twenty-four times. This focus on prayer stands in stark contrast to the findings from surveys of denominational leaders, where only a third mentioned prayer at all. This highlights a potential difference in perspective between those directly involved in church planting and those in more centralized leadership roles. The denominational leaders that did reference prayer were adamant about its significance in reaching young adults, and those that did mention it had all been involved in church planting immediately before taking on senior denominational roles. One denominational leader wrote that a “lack of prayer” was one of the major reasons the Church of England generally struggles to reach young adults, and the same leader wrote that the first thing that would help the Church of England reach young adults would be prayer. According to the denominational leader who mentioned prayer, the churches they highlighted as successful in reaching young adults have a key characteristic: “an expectation that God will move when we pray.”

As already noted, every single church planter mentioned the importance of prayer when it came to planting churches that would reach young adults. Some key findings from the leaders were the importance of praying specifically for young adults. One leader mentioned that their staff team meet every single day to pray together and that they were intentional about praying for young adults. They stated, “So we are intentional about prayer. The prayer is, ‘Lord would you save young adults’, that’s our focus.” A church planter, interviewed about effective practices for reaching young

adults, responded: “Well, I’d say dynamic worship, but even before that, prayer ministry. We receive numerous testimonies from people who have encountered the Lord through prayer, whether through prophetic words or profound experiences. These stories spread, drawing others to come and see for themselves.” This church leader reported having hundreds of young adults attend their 6am prayer meetings that they initiated for a month of prayer.

Another church leader said that for the first year of planting the church, they committed to praying for God to reach young adults every single day. They commented:

At the start of our ministry, [spouses name] and I prayed, ‘God, what’s your heart for the missing generation?’ We felt called to see healing happen and a flourishing community. So, we prayed daily for almost a year, asking God to help us create a community that meets young adults’ needs, drawing them closer to him. Then, we just saw young adults streaming through the doors.

Every single church planter had stories like this, and it is perhaps best summed up by one leader who said the following:

I’ve noticed that almost every young person I’ve prayed with to receive Christ has mentioned having a grandparent or parent or a friend praying for them. It’s a consistent pattern, and I struggle to recall exceptions to this rule. Prayer emerges as the single biggest factor in our evangelism. For us, it means

praying earnestly for God to bring the right people into these young people's lives. It also involves praying for protection over the seeds of faith that have been sown. Just as Jesus said in the parable of the sower in Mark, we're called to pray that these seeds flourish and produce abundant fruit. We must intercede not only for individuals but also for the kind of culture we desire to see. Our collective prayers for a culture of kindness and faithfulness are powerful, and I believe God is faithful to respond to our petitions.

Being Clear on Biblical Truth—Counter Cultural Church

Another common denominator among every single church planter was that being clear about what the Bible says, even when it is at odds with culture, is a way to reach young adults with the good news of Jesus. It has already been noted in the work with focus groups that young adults comment that a lack of clarity on theological issues was a barrier and challenge to engage young adults with the gospel. The leaders confirmed this when they stated that being clear had helped them become somewhere where young adults found a home. When church planters were asked how they incorporate the teaching of the church and the Bible in a way that resonates with young adults, they were very clear: clarity is key. One church leader was emphatic about this when they stated:

It feels to me that if there ever was a time when young adults are suffocated by cultural narratives or the spirits of the age, it's now. Probably for the first time in a long while, Christendom's influence is rapidly diminishing into

post-Christendom. Some may argue with that, but that's been my experience walking around (city name). I believe we need to exegete culture, but we must also exegete Scripture more. It's the linchpin, the lifeblood of how we do mission and ministry. In our city, which some would say is very woke, amongst other diverse narratives, we have to be rooted in the narrative that never changes—in the one who never changes—and critique the cultural narratives that are, in my view, discipling people. We need to disciple people into the story of God as revealed in Scripture.

Some examples of how this has happened were shared by the church planters and church leaders, and they all had stories of holding to the truth of God's word, even when that was culturally hard, and remaining welcoming and open at the same. All of the church leaders had recently taught on identity in relation to human sexuality, and while there was an acknowledgement this was not an easy thing to do, they all said this had been extremely beneficial for their churches and for their engagement with young adults. One said when talking about his engagement with teaching that

our sexuality series also struck a chord with them [young adults]. My belief is that all Scripture is relatable if taught well. Despite what culture might say, discussing sexuality with young adults actually helps the church engage with them. We hosted the sexuality series after an Alpha course, and even the new Christians were eager to attend. It challenged my assumption that new believers needed protection from such topics.

This was corroborated by another church planter who stated that “Many young adults, I find, crave substance over superficiality. They don’t want what I call “Christian fluff.” So, we delved into Jesus’ parables and explored the concept of identity.”

A further church planter also mentioned their teaching on identity and sexuality as being helpful to mission. They stated:

I firmly believe that teaching surrounding sexuality and relationships offer an effective platform for communicating a culture with distinct values and a unique theological anthropology. How individuals navigate their bodies and interact with others serves as a foundational aspect of life and worshipping Jesus. One’s approach to sexuality essentially becomes a litmus test for their beliefs about God, humanity, and the resurrection. Weakening the moral expectations placed upon embodied humans weakens our understanding of God’s Word as his authoritative voice in the world. This, in turn, affects our understanding of both our eternal existence and the purpose of our physical bodies. So actually, I think that being clear on sexuality is vastly better for mission than the alternative which is either silence or just only telling people what you really believe in closed spaces.

What was striking from the research was that only two of the church leaders made reference to the sacraments and liturgy as an aid to engaging young adults in the truth of the faith and the teaching of the church. One church leader, when speaking about biblical illiteracy among young adults, talked of returning to a more liturgical form of

worship to help young adults engage with the scriptures: “This means speaking from the Bible and incorporating the Psalms and more liturgy into our worship. In essence, we’ve embraced a slightly more liturgical approach as a response to the prevalence of biblical illiteracy. We are returning to our Anglican roots, we have become more liturgical, and that begins to form theology in people’s minds.” When answering the question about what strategies they had experienced as being effective for reaching young adults, a second church leader categorically stated that engaging in sacraments and liturgy was the most effective strategy for reaching young adults. They stated that reaching young adults “means doing the things that the church has always done such as gathering on a Sunday, preaching the word of God, celebrating the sacraments, prioritizing the eucharist, confessing sins, saying the creed. These help ground young people in the faith.”

Releasing Young Adults into Leadership

Another key finding from churches that have been identified as places of best practice for reaching young adults was that these churches tend to be very quick at releasing young adults into leadership. One young adult in a focus group commented that along with making young adults feel welcome, giving away leadership is key. “In terms of students, it involves gathering them, making them feel welcome, and ensuring they’re seen and, this has been really key, an effective strategy for new students has been giving them leadership positions. For instance, [name], a second-year student, is now part of our student team and others come because of her.”

The church leader of this church is intentional about making sure that leadership is given away to the young adults. They commented in the semi structured interview that it is an intentional decision from the church leadership to raise up young adults from diverse ethnic backgrounds, all kinds of backgrounds, into leadership positions. This aims to create a wider representation of various ethnicities and life stages within the church, which allows “individuals upon joining to identify with someone who shares their cultural and life stage background (‘oh, that person looks like me’).”

All but one of the other church leaders commented that investing in and releasing young leaders was key to them becoming a place where young people want to be. Three of the church leaders spoke specifically about leadership development pathways that the churches have created (internships, discipleship years) and that these have been a catalyst for other young leaders coming through. One church leader said that for some young adults

seeing their friends take on leadership roles indeed sparks something within others. Our part-time internship program, tailored to accommodate the busy lives of young adults in [city name], has been instrumental. We’ve had conversations with students who didn’t participate in the internship but witnessed the growth and experiences of their friends who did. This ignited a desire for similar spiritual growth and investment.

All of the leaders’ churches actively encourage young adults to step into leadership roles, believing this strategy significantly increases their appeal to young adults.

One of the focus groups told the story of how one young adult, completely new to faith, had been invited by a friend to try church. Relatively quickly, after doing Alpha, joining a small group and meeting up with others to read the bible he was now “stepping up as a leader in our community.” In three other churches, young adults in the focus groups told stories of how they had come to faith and been given opportunities to lead in the church. One young adult, after telling their story of coming to faith, said that “it’s amazing to be in a place where people genuinely care and want to listen to your problems and see you grow and develop as a leader. It’s like finally seeing the sun after months of darkness - everything starts to make sense.”

Strategic Focus on Young Adults

Every church planter that I interviewed had a strategic focus on reaching young adults. This focus exemplified itself in a number of ways, including in prayer as has already been noted. But there are many other ways church leaders noted that they had a strategic focus on young adults. One church leader said that they had to go through a process with their church council to agree that reaching young adults should be reflected in the strategic priorities of the church. They noted that if they were to reach the missing generation, then “directing a substantial portion of the church budget to these age groups is crucial.” Another church leader made a similar comment in the semi structured interview when they said that their budget acts as a prophetic statement: “Our vision is to be a church that reflects the diversity of our city and the young adults who call it home. This vision extends to how we manage our finances. In

this sense, I believe our annual budget becomes a prophetic statement, reflecting our hopes and dream for God's work in the coming year.”

Other church leaders mentioned diverting HR resources to focus on reaching young adults and students, investing in leadership pipelines and being intentional about the focus on evangelism being aimed at young adults. One leader even mentioned that s focus on the missing generation affects their recruitment policy:

We are intentional about the staff we hire. We prioritize people who have a genuine passion for young people and a track record of reaching them or being part of ministries that effectively engage with young adults. While this isn't the sole criteria for hiring, it greatly contributes to the success of our team.

The same leader mentioned that their churches communications strategy had been geared around young adults and the way in which they communicate so that they did not have to break down further barriers when joining a church. Another leader said that the way they were strategically focussed on young adults was by involving them in the governance and decision-making processes of the church: “Recognizing the concerning statistics regarding young adult engagement in the Church of England, it becomes important for us to actively involve them in leadership roles and decision-making processes.” While there were several different ways churches were strategic about focusing on young adults, it was clear that every church involved in the research had made a conscious decision to strategically focus on reaching this missing generation.

This was not lost on some of the young adults who were involved in the focus groups. One young adult commented on the fact that a student worker had been employed stating that “the presence of a paid student worker role... shows a genuine commitment to caring for students and creating community, which is really effective.”

Intentional Community

Though not explicitly mentioned by denominational leaders, both young adults in focus groups and church planters emphasized that creating intentional community is a best practice for reaching more young adults with the message of Jesus. Leaders highlighted the need to create a community of authenticity that young adults trust, another mentioned the importance of having a community in which young adults felt confident they could invite their friends. Another spoke of his perception that young adults want a community where they are both loved deeply and challenged to live differently. One leader put it very succinctly when they said:

Young adults don’t need more information. They need connection. Forget information overload. What young adults and students really want is connection, engagement, and a warm welcome. They want to encounter love, life, the Spirit, and worship, alongside teaching and preaching that sheds light on how the gospel applies to their specific life stages.

Focus groups overwhelmingly identified intentional community as crucial for young adults to engage with church plants. Every group mentioned midweek groups as essential for creating a sense of connection. Notably, many researched churches

experienced significant growth after planting or continued to grow even after sending out new plants. Young adults specifically pointed to midweek groups as key to feeling connected, seen, known, and as a space for discipleship and experiencing community. Young adults describe these groups using words such as “transformative”, “a big draw”, the thing that enabled them “to be connected” and “vital to us feeling part of the church.” Though these midweek groups varied in name and practice (called life groups, connect groups, etc.) and catered to different age ranges (young adults-only or mixed), every young adult focus group emphasized their importance in helping the church connect with and amongst young adults.

Young Adults in the focus groups would share stories of how their church leaders had pursued connection and community with the young adults, and this seemed to leave a lasting impression on them. Five out of the six focus groups all listed this as a determining factor in helping young adults connect with the church. Some told stories of trying church for the first time and the leaders prioritizing connection with them. One said “[church leaders name] has literally run out of the door after someone new that’s trying to slip out unnoticed.” In another church a young adult commented, “It is so clear the leaders are here to accompany us on our journey and see us grow in love with Jesus.” Another young adult made a poignant remark about how they needed to see their church leaders’ authenticity and once they had seen this, it was easy for them to trust the leadership. When answering a question about a time they struggled to connect with the church and it’s teachings they commented:

The main thing that comes to mind for me is the importance of knowing the church leaders and understanding their authenticity... I find that I connect more deeply with the church when I know the leaders...It's about authenticity for me. Sometimes, when we have guest speakers, it takes me a while to adjust because I'm trying to discern if they're trustworthy and if what they say aligns with their life.

Evangelism as a Key Feature of Church Planting

The research consistently highlighted a central theme: church plants prioritizing evangelism and mission serve as models for reaching young adults. Every denominational leader mentioned mission or evangelism in their surveys, while young adults in focus groups discussed these activities undertaken by their churches. Similarly, church leaders identified evangelism and mission as crucial for engaging young adults and generating church growth within this demographic. Frequently mentioned initiatives included courses like Alpha, alongside intentional missional activities targeting young adults or students, such as pizza giveaways or church services designed for non-Christians. For denominational leaders and the church planters, a focus on evangelism was a key strategy to growing the reach with young adults and the missing generation. However, it was clear from a number of the focus groups, that these initiatives also communicated something deeper: that the church cared about this generation. One young adult commented:

There are specific outreach efforts that make a difference. For instance, providing free pizza in freshers week makes people feel welcome and valued. Even my non-Christian friend thought it was a great idea and felt invited and cared for. Outreach efforts like this show that the church is inviting and wants everyone to feel welcome, regardless of their beliefs.

Summary of Major Findings

A thematic analysis of the data revealed several insights into best practices for church planting aimed at young adults. While the research highlighted a number of themes that could all be explored further, the following six key findings emerged as the most common and pertinent to the research questions:

1. The Efficacy of church planting to reach young adults.
2. Empowering young adult leadership helps grow churches.
3. Being clear on the Bible helps reach young adults.
4. The importance of prayer in planting churches that reach young adults.
5. Cultivating intentional community creates safe spaces for young adults.
6. Church Plants must focus on evangelism to reach young adults

The Efficacy of Church Planting to Reach Young Adults

The research data reveals the efficacy of church planting as a powerful strategy for reaching young adults within the Church of England. The analysis of data demonstrated a strong association between church planting and successful outreach to young adults.

Church plants that reach young adults are characterized by a strategic allocation of resources towards young adult ministry. These churches appeared to cultivate and develop mature church communities that effectively engaged young adults. This implies that investing in church planting for young adults can yield significant returns in terms of conversions and engagement.

These findings suggest that successful church plants may be successfully bucking the national trend observed within the Church of England, where young adult engagement has been particularly challenging. This implies the potential for church planting to be a game-changer in engagement with this demographic.

The research found that flourishing church plants tend to have high numbers of young adults in the church community. Additionally, these flourishing plants experience regular instances of young adults coming to faith. This specifically highlights the potential of church planting for reaching unchurched young adults.

The survey sent to denominational leaders revealed overwhelming support for church planting as an effective strategy. Over 83% of leaders rated it as “very effective”. Denominational leaders attributed the success of “Resource Churches” and other church plants to several factors, including stating that their deliberate focus on attracting and engaging young adults creates a welcoming and relevant environment

for this demographic. Church plants are often led by younger leaders who are more in tune with the culture of young adults. Church plants also offer a worship style that makes young adults feel included and engaged in the church community.

Empowering Young Adult Leadership Helps Grow Young Churches.

The analysis of the data shows the crucial role of empowering young adults through leadership roles within the church. This approach ensures a more vibrant and relatable church experience for young adults. When young adults see their peers leading and actively shaping the church, and even church plants, it creates a sense of engagement and ownership.

Seeing young adults lead creates positive role models for other young people. This inspires young adults to see themselves taking on leadership roles. Seeing other people like them reflected on the leadership team helps young adults to see the church as a place where they can belong. Empowering young adults in leadership positions allows them to contribute their perspectives and experiences as young adults and helps shape the church to be more relevant and relatable to their generation. This creates a deeper connection between young adults and the church as a whole.

Empowering young adults through giving away leadership roles to them emerges as a mutually beneficial approach. Denominational leaders highlighted that one of the reasons Church of England churches do not reach young adults is because of a lack of investment in young adult leaders, and those churches that do well in this area sometimes have to work around the system. Investing in Young Adults as leaders not only allows the church to benefit from the fresh perspectives and energy of young

people but also helps with discipleship as the young adults grow spiritually, gain leadership development. It also creates a deeper connection with the church community for them.

Being Clear on the Bible Helps Reach Young Adults

The analysis of the data revealed a significant disparity in perceptions of the importance of theological clarity between different stakeholders within the church. This finding suggests a potential tension between the central structures of the denomination and the realities of the mission field where leaders are planting churches and engaging with young adults.

The data revealed that young adults yearn for open and honest conversations, especially around sensitive topics. They do not want the church to be silent. This desire for transparency and engagement stands in stark contrast to the silence on this from the denominational leaders who were surveyed. There was nothing mentioned in any of the responses from denominational leaders about the importance of being clear on biblical teaching. This potential lack of knowledge from the center on how important bringing clarity is could potentially alienate young adults from the Church of England if silence is replicated across the whole church.

Interestingly, church planters, who unlike most denominational leaders are operating at the missional edge, emphasized theological clarity as crucial for reaching young adults and engaging them with the gospel. They recognize the importance of open discussion and addressing sensitive topics with love and compassion. This perspective suggests that church planters recognize the need for clear and relevant

Bible teaching to reach young adults with the good news of Jesus and see the church grow.

The Importance of Prayer in Planting Churches that Reach Young Adults

The analysis of the data reveals a striking emphasis on prayer as a core practice for reaching young adults within church plants. This finding presents itself as a key theme for several reasons. Every single church planter interviewed highlighted prayer as crucial to their reaching of young adults with the gospel. This unanimous perspective stands in stark contrast to the limited mention of prayer (33%) from denominational leaders when they were surveyed. Church planters described their prayer practices as intentional and strategic, specifically praying for young adults and cultivating a culture of prayer within their communities. Examples include daily staff prayer meetings where young adults are prayed for, dedicated prayer months, the importance of offering prayer ministry and witnessing the impact of prayer on specific individuals.

Church planters consistently emphasized the perceived impact of prayer on their outreach efforts. They shared numerous anecdotes and testimonies linking their prayer practices to positive outcomes in reaching young adults. One leader even identified prayer as the “single biggest factor” in the growth of their church among unreached young adults. In the focus groups, young adults themselves also talked about the importance of receiving prayer for themselves.

This focus on prayer among church planters significantly contrasts with the perspective of some denominational leaders. Notably, the only denominational leader who extensively mentioned prayer had previously been involved in church planting,

suggesting a potential disconnect between central leadership and the realities faced by those on the ground.

Cultivating Intentional Community Helps Create Safe Spaces for Young Adults.

The data highlights the critical role of creating intentional community in attracting and retaining young adults within the church. Whilst this finding was not explicitly recognized by denominational leaders, it was emphasized by both young adults and church planters.

Church planters noticed in young adults a desire for authentic and challenging community that goes beyond mere information or superficial connection. Young adults long for leaders who are genuine and approachable and who can create an environment where young adults feel comfortable and safe to share and grow. Several church planters also emphasized the importance of creating a community of authenticity that young adults can trust. Young adults seek environments where they feel included and accepted. One leader highlighted the importance of having a community where young adults feel confident inviting their friends. This creates a sense of belonging and openness within the church community. While young adults appreciate a welcoming environment, they also desire a community that challenges them to grow in their faith. One leader aptly summarized this desire: “They want to be loved deeply and challenged to live differently.” This balance between acceptance and challenge helps young adults mature spiritually and develop a deeper connection with their faith.

Midweek groups emerge as perhaps the crucial element for creating intentional community among young adults. Every focus group identified midweek groups as essential for building connections. Young adults repeatedly described these groups as “transformative,” a “big draw,” and “vital” to feeling connected, seen, and known. This sense of belonging creates deeper engagement and participation within the church community for young adults. These groups provide a space for spiritual growth, learning and accountability.

It is also worth noting that young adults emphasized the impact of leaders who actively pursued connection and community with them. Young adults shared stories of church leaders prioritizing connection with them, even going out of their way to welcome them and other newcomers to church. When church leaders lead like this, it demonstrates genuine care and creates a welcoming environment for young adults. Young adults also spoke of how they appreciate leaders who are present and supportive in their spiritual journey.

Church Plants Must Focus on Evangelism to Reach Young Adults

Church plants must focus on evangelism if they want to reach un-churched young adults. Every denominational leader mentioned “mission” or “evangelism” in their surveys, while young adults and church planters consistently discussed evangelism in focus groups and interviews. This emphasis by all three groups highlights the importance of evangelism in reaching young adults, most of whom have no faith at all. Both denominational

leaders and church planters identified church plants prioritizing evangelism and mission as models for reaching young adults.

Beyond simply emphasizing evangelism, the research highlights the importance of diverse and engaging strategies that resonate with the culture of young adults. Courses like Alpha were mentioned, and these continue to be effective in engaging young adults who are exploring faith. Intentional missional activities, such as evangelistic activities around freshers' weeks in university cities or events and church services specifically designed for non-Christian young adults can attract them to give church a go as well as demonstrate the church's welcoming and loving nature. These initiatives go beyond attracting young adults; they also communicate a deeper message of care and belonging. As one young adult stated, such efforts show the "church is inviting and wants everyone to feel welcome, regardless of their beliefs."

While the research emphasizes the importance of evangelism in a variety of ways, it is important to acknowledge the continuing power of Sunday gatherings as a starting point for many young adults exploring faith. While not the silver bullet, Sunday services and events can play a vital role in providing an initial point of entry. For many young adults, Sunday services offer a natural entry point to explore faith. Churches should consider structuring services in a way that is welcoming, engaging, and informative for those new to the faith. Sunday services can help young adults come to faith in Jesus. This may involve incorporating elements such as clear and relevant preaching and using liturgy to help explain the gospel.

CHAPTER 5

LEARNING REPORT FOR THE PROJECT

Overview of the Chapter

The Church of England faces a huge challenge, it needs to reach young adults. This “missing generation” is largely absent from churches, prompting the denomination to invest in planting churches specifically in areas with high young adult populations. To maximize the success of church plants, research is crucial to identify best practices in church planting for the sake of reaching this demographic. Questions were asked about what is currently working within church plants that are reaching young adults, what are some of the challenges and what do practitioners planting churches that are reaching young adults think is best practice? By addressing these questions, the Church of England can equip both denominational leadership and church planters with the knowledge and tools needed to effectively reach young adults with the good news of Jesus. In this chapter the major findings of the study are commented upon. The major findings are:

1. The Efficacy of church planting to reach young adults.
2. Empowering young adult leadership helps grow churches.
3. Being clear on the Bible helps reach young adults.
4. The importance of prayer in planting churches that reach young adults.
5. Cultivating intentional community creates safe spaces for young adults.

6. Church Plants must focus on evangelism to reach young adults

The ministry implications for the study are commented upon and the limitations of the study and the unexpected observations are highlighted. Finally, recommendations are made at the end of the chapter for the church to consider implementing to build upon this research.

Major Findings

1. The Efficacy of Church Planting to Reach Young Adults.

Prior to embarking on this research, I possessed some understanding of the challenges faced by the Church of England in engaging young adults with the gospel. This awareness stemmed from a general awareness of the demographic trends and challenges faced by churches in reaching young adults. Anecdotal evidence gathered through my own observations and conversations with church planters had highlighted the potential usefulness of church plants to help turn this situation around. Notably, my own church, a new church plant, stood out as somewhat of an exception within my own diocese. We were having successful engagement with young adults compared to other established churches in the diocese. As I mentioned in Chapter 1, this observation served as something of a catalyst for this research, prompting a deeper exploration of the potential for church planting as a strategy for reaching young adults within the Church of England.

During the research I observed that church planting is an effective strategy for engaging young adults with the good news of Jesus. The data analysis reveals a strong

positive association between church planting and successful outreach to this demographic. Church plants characterized by strategic resource allocation towards young adult ministry appear to cultivate thriving communities that effectively engage young adults. Additionally, flourishing church plants tend to have high numbers of young adults actively participating and experiencing conversions. These findings suggest a potential link between strategic investment and positive outcomes for young adults engaging with the gospel, potentially reversing the national trend of declining engagement within the Church of England.

Furthermore, denominational leaders overwhelmingly support church planting as an effective strategy, with over 83% rating it as “very effective.” The success of initiatives like *Resource Churches*, which explicitly focus on young adults, reinforces the notion that targeted church planting strategies can be highly successful. Leaders attribute this success to factors such as a welcoming and relevant environment, younger leadership, and a worship style that resonates with young adults, creating a sense of connection, understanding, and inclusion.

My research involved focus groups with young adults from six distinct church plants and individual interviews with church leaders. This process provided a compelling opportunity to personally engage with young adults who had embraced Christianity through the mission and ministry of these church plants. Significantly, the recurring narratives shared by these individuals suggested that their experiences were not isolated incidents, but rather representative of a broader trend. This observation

provides strong evidence for the potential of church plants in facilitating young adults coming to faith through the Church of England.

My literature review looked into the discourse surrounding church planting and how it can generate and help with church growth. Several prominent voices within the field offer insights that align with and bolster the findings of this research, particularly regarding the potential of church planting to reach young adults.

Tim Keller, who was a leading voice on church planting, positions church planting as the single most critical strategy for cultivating church growth. He argues that church planting is itself effective evangelism, and that church planting is the single most effective strategy for growing the church. This perspective stands in contrast to the viewpoint expressed by David Male, who suggests that evangelism must precede church planting. However, the findings of this research appear to resonate more closely with Keller's statement that church planting itself constitutes evangelism. His rationale rests upon the inherently communal dimension of evangelism, encompassing not only individual salvation but also the integration of new believers into the Christian community. This notion aligns with the perspective of Hellerman, who contends that salvation intrinsically creates community.

Furthermore, Roland Allen, a key figure in missiology, offers a critical perspective on contemporary understandings of mission and evangelism. He argues that we tend to prioritize mission over church planting, while St. Paul's focus was primarily on establishing and planting churches. This aligns with the observation of Christopher Wright, who states, "it is not so much the case that God has a mission for

his church in the world but that God has a church for his mission in the world. Mission was not made for the church; the church was made for mission” (Chapter 2).

If, as Wright suggests, the church exists for mission and evangelism, then planting churches in locations where evangelism is desired becomes imperative. Given the current context, with reaching young adults emerging as a primary mission field in England, the literature review lends support to the notion that planting churches in areas with significant young adult populations is crucial. This aligns with the findings of John McGinley, who notes, “All the studies of church plants in the UK have shown that newly planted churches have a higher percentage of people involved who did not previously belong to a church” (117). Other leading practitioners in the UK, such as Selvaratnam corroborate McGinley’s statement. The findings of my own focus groups with young adults and interviews with church leaders resonate with McGinley’s observation, demonstrating that new church plants attract a high percentage of young adults who have not previously been engaged with the church.

The biblical and theological foundations of this project challenge the common interpretation that the New Testament serves as the exclusive lens for understanding mission and church planting from a biblical perspective. While scholars like Bosch and Viola emphasize the New Testament as the primary source for missional theology, this research proposes a more holistic framework that integrates the entirety of the biblical narrative.

This framework argues that mission and church planting are not solely New Testament concepts but are woven into the very fabric of scripture, beginning with creation itself.

The planting of humanity serves as the first instance of God establishing a community entrusted with glorifying Him and stewarding His creation (Gen. 1.26-28). This act lays the foundation for understanding mission as inherent to God's redemptive plan from the outset. Furthermore, the narrative of Abraham in Genesis 12 exemplifies the concept of planting a community for the purpose of mission. God calls Abraham to establish himself and his family "as a blessing" in a new land (Gen. 12.2). This intentional establishment or planting of a faith community foreshadows the concept of church planting as a means of extending God's blessing to new contexts.

The continual narrative of God's people being planted in foreign lands throughout the Old Testament reinforces this concept. Figures like Joseph in Egypt (Gen. 41.39-40) and the exiles in Babylon (Jer. 29.7) demonstrate the consistent pattern of God establishing his people as agents of blessing within foreign communities. This emphasis underscores the inherent connection between mission and the planting of faith communities throughout the entire biblical narrative. Here we see that the purpose of church planting is not primarily the preservation of an institution but a means of seeking the wellbeing and blessing of the community in which it serves.

Building upon this foundation, the New Testament provides further evidence of the intrinsic link between mission and church planting. The Great Commission in Matthew 28.19-20 is understood as a commission to plant churches, as Setzer and Im convincingly argue: "The earliest churches obeyed the Great Commission by planting new congregations to carry out the assignments of discipling, baptizing, and teaching

that would begin the multiplication process of planting more and more churches” (Chapter 3). Where young adults need reaching, churches should be planted.

2. Empowering Young Adult Leadership Helps Grow Churches.

Prior to embarking on this research, I held the general perception that the Church of England had limited involvement of young adults in leadership roles. This observation comes from within the dioceses I have served in and anecdotal evidence from conversations with others. The general lack of opportunities and the structures to generate opportunities for leadership present significant challenges for young people seeking leadership opportunities and wanting to help shape the future of the church. During the research process, the analysis of data revealed that empowering young adults through leadership roles plays a crucial role in creating a more exciting and relatable church experience for them. Church plants generally are led by young people, and they create space for young people to lead. This approach creates engagement, ownership, and a sense of belonging among young adults. Witnessing their peers leading inspires others to see themselves as potential future leaders and even just tells young adults there is a space for them in the church. Hearing young adult perspectives through giving them leadership positions allows the church to be more relevant to their generation.

Following my research, I am firmly convinced of the necessity to empower young adults by entrusting them with leadership roles within the Church of England. Not only does the church benefit from the fresh perspectives and energy of young leaders, but these young adults also experience spiritual growth, leadership development as

well as a deeper connection to the church community through their leadership roles.

Addressing the lack of investment in young adult leaders and finding creative solutions to navigate existing structures are crucial steps toward creating a church environment where young adults can thrive and contribute their gifts for the sake of reaching more young adults with the good news of Jesus.

Since carrying out the research, I have been surprised at the limited focus on empowering young adults through leadership roles within the literature that I surveyed. While authors like Schroeder recognize the necessity of involving young adults in decision-making processes, the literature review revealed a relative silence in the literature around releasing young people into leadership in the church. This warrants further investigation and interpretation. Some, such as McGinley, do argue for new leadership structures and a culture shift in the Church of England that empowers leadership, but much of this is to do with laity in general rather than specifically about young people. Seversen provided some compelling research that highlighted that young adults who were given a role and leadership investment enabled them to feel like they were contributing to the life of the church and helped them to find community and even salvation through this.

This lack of emphasis on young adult leadership in academic literature underscores the importance of this research. By highlighting the crucial role of empowering young adults through leadership positions, this project should prompt and provoke further research in this area.

The story of Joseph in Egypt shows how God can use anyone to serve his purposes. Despite his young age, Joseph's wisdom and leadership were instrumental in saving the nation of Egypt (and other nations) from famine. This narrative shows that God is not bound by conventional leadership qualifications and can empower whoever he chooses for his purposes. The disciples of Jesus were young men, lacking formal theological training and yet were entrusted by Jesus with the task of carrying out the Great Commission (Matt. 28.19-20). Their faithfulness and willingness to follow Jesus' Great Commission meant that they were involved in planting churches as soon as that commission had been given.

3. Being Clear on the Bible Helps Reach Young Adults.

Prior to starting on this research project, my personal observations suggested a positive correlation between clear biblical teaching and successful engagement of young adults. This anecdotal evidence came from observing flourishing churches that openly communicated their theological positions. Many of the church planters I have conversations with are seeing success in reaching young adults, and most of them are very clear on what the Bible teaches.

Young adults yearn for open and honest discussions, and this is particularly true when it comes to sensitive topics. They desire a church that actively creates an atmosphere of transparency and addresses their questions and concerns. This desire for open communication stands in stark contrast to the silence on this being a way to reach young adults from the denominational leaders who were surveyed. What was surprising was that the data from denominational leaders lacked explicit mention of

the importance of theological clarity in reaching young adults. This potential disconnect between the central structures and the realities on the ground in church plants of engaging young adults raises concerns about potential alienation of young adults from the Church of England as a whole if biblical clarity and openness is not offered from the whole church.

Interestingly, the data revealed that church planters and leaders at the missional forefront of the Church of England strongly emphasized the importance of theological clarity and integrity for reaching young adults. All the church leaders recognized the value of authentic discussions and highlighted the need to address sensitive topics with truth, love and compassion. At least two of the church planters mentioned that engagement with the liturgy and sacraments would help the church emphasize the teachings of the church.

The findings of this research are supported by the literature review. Kreider says that the early church grew due to its countercultural nature. The distinctive character of the early Christian community served as an attractive force in a world filled with worldviews that were different to that of the church. This notion resonates with the finding that young adults yearn for a church that is distinct and clear in its convictions.

Hayward's research reinforces the significance of theological clarity. He observed that churches that liberalized their doctrinal positions declined. Conversely, churches that upheld traditional and biblical teachings grew. Hayward's work matches

the research data suggesting that embracing a clear theological position increases the likelihood of effectively engaging young adults with the gospel.

Seversen's research conducted in the US provides compelling evidence that embracing both engagement with society and orthodox distinctiveness is essential for church growth. This finding resonates with the research data that both church planters and young adults emphasize the need for open dialogue on controversial issues as well as clear biblical teaching.

The literature review highlighted Seversen's research surrounding the importance of addressing issues surrounding sexuality in reaching and retaining young adults. This finding aligns with the data suggesting that young adults yearn for open and honest discussions, particularly concerning sensitive topics. Every young adult focus group mentioned sexuality specifically as something that needs to be addressed. By embracing theological clarity while enabling open and compassionate dialogue, the Church can create an environment where young adults feel welcome, understood, and empowered to explore the truth of the scriptures.

The church planters who expressed that the liturgy of the church, public worship and celebration of the sacraments were helping them engage with Young Adults are not alone. Packiam, Bevins and Wilson were highlighted in the literature review as commending this kind of approach as useful for evangelism. Packiam states specifically that it was helpful for engaging young adults. David Watson, writing over 40 years ago, states that "renewal of the true sacramental life of the church... would

enhance, not detract from, the mission of the church in our spiritually starved society” (226). Some of the church planters are finding this to still be true today.

The biblical and theological framework for this project pointed to the fact that cultural and theological distinctiveness is needed by those who are seeking to reach others with the good news of Jesus. The people of God were always called to be distinct, to be a blessing to the nations, a light to the gentiles. Jeremiah 29 presents a seemingly contradictory message to the Israelites exiled in Babylon. While longing for their homeland, they are instructed by God to actively integrate into Babylonian society (build houses, plant gardens, marry and have families). This unexpected directive challenges the Israelites’ understanding of their exile as a temporary punishment and instead as an instruction from God to engage the culture whilst not losing their distinctiveness. This was precisely what church planters were indicating they were trying to do when I interviewed them.

By emphasizing the long-term nature of their stay and linking their own well-being to Babylon’s prosperity, God calls the Israelites to a unique mission. They are to embody a distinct presence within Babylon, contributing to its welfare while remaining faithful to their own values. This aligns with the broader theme of the Old Testament, as Goheen highlights. Despite encountering different cultures and ideologies, God’s people retain their calling to be a “light to the nations” and a source of blessing for others.

The message of Jeremiah 29 is a challenging biblical foundation for church planters today. While encouraging integration and engagement with the surrounding

community, similar to God's people being sent to live in Babylon, in Jeremiah God cautions against complete assimilation, urging them to maintain their distinct identity as God's people. The research found that young adults respond positively to churches that are both clear in their convictions and open to dialogue. By embracing this approach, church planters can effectively reach young adults who may inhabit the prevailing church culture that is different from the culture expected by God of his church.

Mark Sayers insists leaders should not look for quick fixes (what he calls solutionism) but instead remember that the answer to the problems of society is still the gospel. If church plants in the Church of England are to be faithful to their heritage, they must prioritize the preaching of the word. According to Article 19 of the Church of England, the preaching of the word is a core element of what it means to be the church. Baptism and Holy Communion are viewed as sacramental practices integral to the life of the Church. Therefore, church planters within the Anglican tradition must prioritize these core elements—the teaching and preaching of the word, and the proper administration of the sacraments. Doing so ensures that newly planted churches align with the understanding of church held by the Church of England, and it may also help them reach young adults with the good news of Jesus.

4. The Importance of Prayer in Planting Churches that Reach Young Adults

My personal experience as a church planter has consistently highlighted the vital role of prayer in what God has called me to do. My lived experience resonates with the

findings of this research project, which further emphasize the significance of prayer in reaching young adults with the Gospel message.

During the research I observed a striking emphasis on prayer as a fundamental practice for reaching young adults within church planting contexts. This theme emerges as significant for several reasons. Every single church planter interviewed identified prayer as critical to their outreach efforts, highlighting a unanimous perspective. This stands in stark contrast to the limited mention of prayer (33%) from denominational leaders.

Church planters consistently emphasized the impact of prayer on their outreach, and they shared numerous anecdotes linking prayer to positive results in reaching young adults. Notably, one leader even attributed prayer as the “single biggest factor” in their churches evangelistic efforts. Young adults participating in the focus groups also acknowledged the importance of receiving prayer. This emphasis on prayer among church planters stands in stark contrast to silence on prayer from some of the denominational leaders who were surveyed. The limited mention of prayer amongst the denominational leaders, with only one leader mentioning it extensively (and they had prior church planting experience), suggests a potential disconnect between central leadership and the practical realities faced by those actively engaging young adults on the ground. If the Church of England wants to reach more young adults, it must learn to make prayer a priority again.

The findings of this research, emphasizing the importance of prayer for church planters reaching young adults, are further substantiated by insights gleaned from the

literature review. Prominent figures within the Church of England, like the Archbishop of York, Stephen Cottrell, advocate for the centrality of prayer through his leadership approach, aptly titled *Hit the Ground Kneeling*. This emphasizes the integrated connection between prayer and effective leadership. The fact that the Archbishop has written on prayer should further highlight the silence on prayer from the denominational leaders who were surveyed.

Works by Ma, Gleason, and Bevins all show the crucial role of prayer in reaching young adults with the message of the gospel and in successful church planting. Similarly, Robinson argues that personal holiness and consistent prayer life must be central to a church leader's life and that this is even more important than the significance of mastering the latest best practice. This notion is further supported by the writings of Matthew Porter and Gavin and Anne Calver who also emphasize the importance of prayer in leadership and ministry. Ott and Wilson identify prayer as the single most influential factor contributing to the success of church planting initiatives.

Prayer is central to theology and the biblical narrative. This biblical and theological framework of prayer highlights the importance of prayer within the context of church planting, particularly when reaching young adults. Two biblical passages and foundations that were discussed in Chapter 2 show the centrality of prayer in church planting. Firstly, the Exiles in Babylon (Jer. 29.7). God instructs people of God who are in exile in Babylon not only to integrate into their new surroundings but also to actively pray for the city's wellbeing. This narrative suggests that prayer creates deeper engagement with the surrounding community, ultimately contributing to the

people of God's own prosperity and blessing. God's desire is for both the exiles and the city to flourish. This should inspire church planters towards prayer.

Paul's church planting journeys also highlight the importance of prayer. Paul's discernment regarding location and the planting of new churches is very clearly guided by prayer and the leading of the Holy Spirit. In Acts 16.6-10, Paul encounters closed doors in Bithynia and Mysia. They had been clearly praying about these locations as the Holy Spirit told them 'no'. Paul and his travel companions continue to pray. This prayerful obedience leads to a vision directing them to Macedonia, ultimately resulting in the planting of the church in Philippi. The story of the church plant in Philippi highlights the role of prayer in church planting. These biblical foundations, along with the findings from the literature review and data from this research project, illustrate the significance of prayer in church planting.

1. Cultivating Intentional Community Creates Safe Spaces for Young Adults

My experience as a church planter instilled in me the importance of creating intentional community, without it the church I planted simply would not have worked. Witnessing firsthand how deep discipleship flourishes within community, I also observed through this research just how important creating intentional welcoming and loving communities are to the flourishing of young adults within the church context.

Focus groups with young adults revealed a longing for both authentic and challenging communities. Young adults do not want superficial connection. They want genuine and approachable leaders who create an environment where they feel comfortable, safe and accepted. This was backed up by several church planters, who

emphasized the importance of building a trustworthy community built on authenticity. One church planter put it succinctly when they said: “Young adults don’t need more information. They need connection.” While a welcoming environment is important, young adults also crave a community that challenges them to grow in their relationship with Jesus. One leader summarized this desire when they said that their observation of young adults is that they “want to be loved deeply and challenged to live differently.” I observed that this balance between acceptance and challenge is seen as crucial for spiritual maturity and deeper connection with faith for young adults.

Midweek groups emerged as a key element in creating intentional community among young adults. Every focus group identified these groups as essential for building connections. The consistent mention of midweek groups, regardless of specific names or formats highlighted their effectiveness in creating a space for connection and belonging. Young adults repeatedly described these groups as transformative, vital, and a big draw. They helped young adults feel seen, known, and connected. This sense of belonging creates a deeper engagement and participation within the church community. During the research I also observed the impact of leaders who actively pursue connection and community with young adults. This authentic engagement creates a lasting impression and creates trust. Young adults shared stories of leaders prioritizing connection, welcoming newcomers, and being present and supportive in their spiritual journey.

The literature review reveals the vital role of intentional and authentic communities in reaching young adults. Fromm and Read, experts in marketing to

young adults, identify the qualities of transparency and authenticity as key factors for brands amongst young adults. This finding translates directly to the Church; church leaders should be transparent and authentic. Pokluda challenges church leaders to critically self-evaluate by questioning whether they embody values like vulnerability, authenticity, and transparency in their lives and leadership (Pokluda). He argues that the absence of these traits hinders effective gospel outreach and engagement with young adults.

DeVries and Pointier further emphasize the need to shift focus from solely understanding young adults to building authentic connections and relationships with them. Their critique highlights the potential risk of falling into the trap of information overload and losing sight of the importance of genuine human connection. Morey cautions against leaders solely focusing on acquiring “vocational competencies” and instead urges them to cultivate “spiritual competencies” (Morey). These spiritual competencies, which would include healthy connections with both God and others, are deemed essential for long-term effective leadership. This perspective highlights the importance of authenticity and genuine connection as fundamental leadership qualities, creating trust and creating environments conducive to spiritual growth for young adults within the Church.

The literature review emphasizes the critical role of authenticity, transparency, and genuine connection in building trust and cultivating relationships with young adults. Leaders who prioritize these qualities, alongside spiritual growth and healthy connections with God and others, are better equipped to create a welcoming and

engaging environment for young adults within the Church. This approach resonates with the desires expressed by young adults in the focus groups and interviews, highlighting the need for a shift from mere information sharing to genuine connection and community building.

Paul's intentional travel to plant churches with a community of people (Acts 16) shows the importance of intentional community. This narrative reveals the potential strength and encouragement from fellowship and shared commitment and highlights the value of intentional community in churches and their church planting work. The call of Abraham in Genesis 12.1-3 offers another. Abraham is not called solely as an individual, but with the promise: "I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing" (Gen. 12.2). This community surrounding Abraham joins what he is doing. The experience of God's people in exile in Jeremiah 29 also contributes to our understanding of intentional community. The people of God are instructed to seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which God carried them into exile. They are also encouraged by God to build homes, marry, plant gardens and settle down in the community. This emphasis on engaging with and contributing to the wellbeing of the whole city, while maintaining their distinct identity, supports the idea of intentional community highlighted by church planters and young adults. It highlights the potential for intentional communities to impact the community and city in which they live.

While the specific concept of intentional community might not be explicitly highlighted in my theological and biblical foundations, the importance of community

is present in the biblical narrative. The narratives of Paul's journeys, Abraham's calling, and the experience of God's people in exile all illustrate the power of community in fulfilling God's purposes. These biblical and theological foundations provide a framework for understanding and appreciating the value of intentional community in reaching young adults and planting churches with vibrant community life that will appeal to them.

1. Church Plants Must Focus on Evangelism to Reach Young Adults

I have observed that reaching young adults through church plants necessitates a focus on evangelism. This research highlights the important role of evangelism in a church plant, as evidenced by the consistent emphasis on "mission" and "evangelism" by denominational leaders, young adults, and church planters. Numerous testimonies from young adults themselves supported the impact of church plants' evangelistic work in their journeys of faith in Jesus.

Prior to embarking on this research, I observed the necessity of prioritizing evangelism to reach people that did not know Jesus. This is particularly true of young adults who have been dubbed 'the missing generation'. This observation was further confirmed through the personal stories of young adults who were drawn to church communities due to their welcoming nature, sometimes even independently of explicit evangelistic efforts.

Denominational leaders, young adults, and church planters all acknowledged its critical role in engaging young adults, the majority of whom are unchurched in the UK. Notably, both denominational leadership and church planters identified church

plants that prioritize evangelism and mission as models for success in attracting and retaining young adults.

It is important to note that the research did not highlight one way evangelism should be done. Initiatives such as Alpha courses and missional activities targeted specifically towards young adults were identified as effective strategies, not only in attracting them but also in communicating a message of care and belonging. As one young adult stated, the evangelism they saw taking place demonstrated that the “church is inviting and wants everyone to feel welcome, regardless of their beliefs.”

While Sunday gatherings are not the sole solution, the research acknowledges their continued relevance as a starting point for many young adults exploring faith. When structured to be welcoming, engaging, and informative for newcomers, these gatherings can serve as a natural entry point and contribute to young adults coming to faith. This might involve incorporating elements such as clear and relevant preaching alongside liturgy that aids in explaining the gospel.

I have observed through this research that intentional evangelism is key to reaching young adults within church plants. While proactive outreach efforts are crucial, they must be accompanied by an atmosphere of genuine warmth and inclusivity that resonates with the diverse needs and preferences of young adults exploring faith.

The important role of evangelism in the success of church planting is strongly supported by the literature review. Several authors offer compelling insights on this crucial connection. Bishop David Pytches emphasizes the particular effectiveness of church planting for evangelism, highlighting the initial three years as “exceptionally

fruitful” in terms of gospel outreach and evangelism (293). This appears to have been true for the new churches that have been planted that have been part of this research. Paas takes a historical perspective, arguing that church plants organically emerged from the act of what he terms “gospel planting”. His perspective suggests that evangelism lays the groundwork for church growth.

The findings that a focus on evangelism in church planting is significant for reaching young adults with the good news of Jesus resonate with the biblical and theological foundations of this project. The concept of being sent emerges as a key foundation theologically and biblically. The act of sending undertaken by God is not without purpose; it is for the purpose of revealing himself to others. Eleanor and Alan Kreider note that sending characterizes God’s strategy and action. This perspective fits in well with the Great Commission in Matthew 28.19-20, where Jesus sends his disciples to “make disciples of all nations.”

Goheen further strengthens this connection by highlighting how, in the gospels, Jesus equipped his disciples to make it clear that the Kingdom of God had arrived. This underscores the inherent link between evangelism and the expansion of God’s kingdom, a central theme within Scripture.

The Old Testament provides a number of examples of individuals sent by God for the specific purpose of revealing his glory and blessing others. Abraham and Joseph are good examples, demonstrating how God sends individuals to be planted in specific locations not only to establish a presence there, but to bless the people who live there.

The Psalms are full of evangelistic praise. Psalm 96.3 declares the call for the people of God to “[d]eclare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples.” The Psalmist highlighting the responsibility of God’s people to share his glory and truth with the nations. This is echoed later in the psalm with the words of the psalmist, “Say among the nations, ‘The Lord is king!’” (Ps. 96.10). These verses highlight the connection between worship and mission, suggesting that the worship of God’s people finds its natural extension in proclaiming his Lordship to the world. Similarly, Psalm 22.27 expresses the hope that “all the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord, and all the families of the nations shall worship before him.” This verse echoes the promise made to Abraham in Genesis 12.3, where God declares that “all the families of the earth shall be blessed” through him. In the Psalms we see that God sends His people, both individuals and communities, to reveal His glory, bring blessing to others, and ultimately lead them to worship Him.

The findings of this research regarding evangelism resonate deeply with the biblical and theological framework of this project. The concept of being sent by God for the purpose of revealing his glory and inviting others into his Kingdom forms the core foundation for evangelism being a priority within church planting. By understanding and embracing a focus on evangelism, church planters in the Church of England can more effectively fulfill their calling to share the gospel with all, particularly young adults.

Ministry Implications of the Findings

1. The Church of England Should Prioritize Church Planting in Areas with Significant Young Adult Populations

This research highlights the efficacy of church planting as a strategy for reaching young adults within the Church of England. Based on the findings, the following ministry implication is proposed: *The Church of England should strategically prioritize church planting in areas with significant young adult populations.* This should be particularly true of university towns and cities, but not only limited to these places.

This recommendation is supported by the following from this research:

- The research data reveals a strong positive association between church planting and reaching young adults.
- Church plants that are intentional about allocating resources towards young adult ministry create thriving churches with many young adults in them.
- Denominational leaders, church planters and young adults all emphasized the effectiveness of church plants for reaching young adults.
- Focus groups with young adults and interviews with church leaders provided compelling evidence for church plants facilitating numbers of young adults coming to faith through the Church of England.
- The literature review lines up with the findings, with leading figures like Tim Keller and John McGinley advocating for the effectiveness of church planting in reaching new generations.

- The biblical and theological foundation expands the understanding of mission and church planting, suggesting the presence of planting throughout all of scripture.

In the light of this, strategically prioritizing church planting in areas with large concentrations of young adults will enable the Church of England to fulfill its calling to *proclaim the gospel afresh in each generation and be a Christian presence in every community*. This approach will require commitment from leadership at all levels, including the allocation of resources. Where possible, the church should provide financial and personnel support to establish and sustain church plants specifically targeting young adults. This may mean investing specifically in student and young adult workers or ministers. Investment must be made in both training and equipping church planters with the necessary skills and knowledge to effectively engage with young adults. It may also mean the Church of England needs to develop a supportive network of church planters reaching young adults so that knowledge sharing can happen.

By embracing and prioritizing church planting in areas where young adults live, the Church of England could become younger, more diverse and more effective in reaching young people with the good news of Jesus.

The Church of England Should Empower Young Adults into Leadership Roles within the Church

This research highlights the critical role of empowering young adults through leadership roles within the Church of England. Based on the findings, the following ministry implication is proposed: *The Church of England should actively cultivate a culture that empowers young adults to participate in leadership positions at all levels.*

This recommendation is supported by the following key points:

- The research revealed a positive association between empowering young adults through leadership and creating a positive church experience for them.
- Church plants are often led by young people, and they demonstrate the effectiveness of empowering young people with the gospel.
- Young adult leaders bring fresh perspectives and energy to the church, while also benefiting from the leadership opportunities themselves. Empowering young adults is a win-win.

Implementing this ministry implication would require significant disruption in the way the Church of England currently thinks about leadership. Church leaders, as well as the Church of England as a whole, need to acknowledge and appreciate the value of young adult leadership. This will also require the Church to identify and nurture young adults in a way that it has not done before. Investing in programs and initiatives that identify young adults with leadership potential and provide them with mentorship, training, and support to develop their leadership skills will be crucial. The Church needs to intentionally create opportunities for young adults to participate in leadership roles at various levels, and crucially, involve them in decision making at a national as well as a local level. All of this will require the Church of England being open to

adapting existing leadership structures to better accommodate and empower young adults. Current leadership pipelines need to be adapted where they are not fit for purpose.

The impact of this on the Church of England could be huge. The church nationally could benefit from the unique perspectives and energy of young leaders. Denominational leaders I surveyed have already observed that churches that reach young people generally have younger leadership teams. By releasing the younger leaders we do have, we could help the whole church become younger and more diverse. The Church of England wants to be a blessing to the whole nation. By equipping and empowering young adults in leadership now, this will not only benefit the church but also the wider community in the long run.

Be Clear on the Bible

This research highlights the importance of bringing theological clarity while creating spaces for open dialogue with young adults. This is key to reaching them effectively with the good news of Jesus. Based on the findings, I propose the following: *that the Church of England should actively cultivate a culture of clear and honest theological communication while creating safe spaces for open dialogue with young adults on sensitive topics. The church of England should be clear on the Bible.*

This recommendation is supported by the following data from this research:

- Data analysis revealed a discrepancy between leadership levels regarding the importance of theological clarity. Young adults and church planters

emphasized its significance while denominational leaders did not explicitly mention it as a key factor.

- Young adults want open and honest discussions, particularly concerning sensitive topics.
- Church planters directly working with young adults strongly emphasized the importance of theological clarity and being clear on biblical teaching for effectively reaching young adults.

If the Church of England were to adopt this implication, then it would need to articulate clear theological positions, something it has not always done in recent times. This would involve developing concise and accessible resources, encouraging open communication within the church, avoiding ambiguity where possible and not shying away from the doctrine that it holds. For this to happen the Church is going to need to create safe spaces for dialogue. Establishing environments in church plants where honest conversations on sensitive topics can occur is crucial. Demonstrating a willingness to engage with diversity while holding fast to the truth the church has received will be key.

If it were to do this, the gap between central structures and those actively engaging young adults could be bridged. If those who are reaching young adults know that being clear on the bible and speaking the truth in love helps reach young adults, this is something the whole Church is going to have to take seriously. This intentional effort to bring theological clarity and have open dialogue could contribute to the revitalization of the Church of England. It would have stronger relationships with

young adults as they would feel valued and heard while the biblical clarity would ultimately enable them to grow in their faith. Clarity on the bible is kindness, the Church of England should embrace this implication.

1. Create a Culture of Prayer

This research highlights the critical role of prayer in reaching young adults within the Church of England. Based on the findings, *The Church of England should actively cultivate a culture of prayer*, encouraging both individual and communal prayer practices, for the specific purpose of reaching young adults with the Gospel and to pray for churches that have been planted to reach young adults.

This recommendation is supported by the following key data from the research:

- Every single church planter interviewed identified prayer as crucial to their success.
- Young adults participating in focus groups also acknowledged the importance of receiving prayer.
- The limited mention of prayer (33%) from denominational leaders suggests a potential disconnect between their understanding and the realities faced by those actively engaging young adults.
- The literature review reinforces the significance of prayer.

Implementing this ministry implication will require a culture shift within the Church of England. If prayer really is a crucial factor in seeing people come to faith then the Church of England must integrate prayer into everything that it does. At

theological colleges there is much time given over to the accumulation of theological knowledge but very little time to developing leaders' prayer lives. This needs to change. As well as providing resources and guidance to encourage young adults to develop their personal prayer lives, churches should also organize dedicated prayer initiatives specifically aimed at reaching young adults. Church planters must also be supported by a culture of prayer.

By embracing a culture of prayer, the Church of England could see more young adults reached with the good news of Jesus. If church planters have discovered that prayer is the key to reaching young adults, the whole denomination could be transformed if leaders at every level were active and strategic in their prayers. The research highlighted that some church planters believe prayer to be the single most important thing they do in order to reach young adults. This intentional emphasis on prayer can contribute to the revitalization of the Church of England as a whole.

1. The Church of England Should Recognise the Importance of Midweek Groups for Connection and Discipleship and Encourage all Churches to Invest in Them

This research emphasizes the critical role of intentional community in attracting, retaining, and nurturing the spiritual growth of young adults within the Church of England. Based on the findings, *the Church of England should recognise the importance of midweek groups for connection and discipleship and encourage all churches to invest in such communities*. This ministry implication is supported by the following data from the research of this project:

- Both young adults and church planters identified intentional community as crucial for young adults flourishing in their faith and engaging with the church.
- Young adults yearn for authentic connections, a sense of belonging, and a community that challenges them to grow in their faith.
- Midweek groups emerged as a key priority in creating intentional community,
- Leaders who actively pursue authentic connection with young adults and embody authenticity build trust and create communities of deep engagement.

This ministry implication would require all churches within the Church of England to focus on midweek discipleship and communities as well as Sundays. All churches should create inviting spaces within the church where young adults feel comfortable and accepted. This will require church leaders to provide dedicated opportunities for young adults (and others if context requires) to connect, build relationships, and grow in their faith. This will require churches to raise leaders to lead such communities.

These leaders will need to be equipped with the skills necessary to build trust, create authentic connections, and challenge young adults to grow spiritually. These groups must model and promote transparency and authenticity.

The impact of this on the whole Church of England would not be insignificant. It would offer young adults, and others, a sense of belonging and connection within the church that is not limited to a Sunday experience only.

The church could create environments conducive to spiritual growth and deeper engagement with faith. Having such groups would mean empowering whole cohorts of leaders to build trust and create meaningful relationships with young adults.

1. The Church of England Needs to Place a Much Stronger Emphasis on Evangelism

This research emphasizes the essential role of evangelism in reaching young adults with the good news of Jesus. Therefore, *the Church of England needs to place a much stronger emphasis on evangelism*. This implication for ministry is for all churches in the Church of England. It is supported by the following data from the research:

- All three groups involved in the research (denominational leaders, young adults, and church planters) acknowledged the importance of evangelism in reaching young adults.
- Young adult testimonies affirmed the impact of welcoming church communities, some even in the absence of explicit evangelistic efforts. The welcome itself was evangelistic
- The research highlights the need for diverse and engaging evangelistic strategies to reach young adults.
- Sunday services, with their focus on teaching the scriptures, worship and liturgy, can serve as an evangelistic entry point for young adults exploring faith.

This will require the Church of England to invest resources to equip church planters with evangelism skills. This training and resource provision should not just be limited to church planters; all leaders should develop effective and age-appropriate and culturally relevant evangelistic strategies. Church planters should ensure church services are inviting and inclusive whilst teaching the truth of the Christian faith. The research shows that this will create a sense of belonging for young adults regardless of their beliefs. Church planters should be encouraged to design and implement outreach initiatives specifically geared towards young adults. There are effective evangelistic tools already available, such as the Alpha course, but young adults and church planters highlighted several creative missional and evangelistic activities that had been pioneered in different churches. Church planters should also ensure clear and relevant communication of the Gospel message through preaching, liturgy, celebration of the sacraments and culturally appropriate Sunday worship.

I believe that if the Church of England were to invest in training more church planters and leaders for evangelism that it would reach not just more young adults with the Gospel message, but lots more people generally. Evangelism generally leads to the creation of church communities where young adults feel included, valued, and safe to explore their faith.

Limitations of the Study

I acknowledge that this research has a few limitations. These limitations highlight potential areas for further research from Asbury Theological Seminary Doctorate students.

One limitation of the research is the denominational focus as it was confined to the Church of England. While this approach facilitated a focused exploration within a specific context, it could potentially limit the generalizability of findings to other denominations. Including churches from other denominations experiencing success in reaching young adults would enrich the study by providing a broader perspective and potentially revealing transferable best practices across denominational boundaries. It may well be that the Church of England needs to learn from best practice in other denominations too.

The exclusive inclusion of ordained leaders as church planters in the interviews represents another limitation. The growing presence of lay leaders in church planting within the Church of England raises the question of whether their perspectives and experiences might differ from those of ordained leaders. Expanding the research to include lay leaders could potentially uncover additional insights to reaching young adults. As the Church of England will increasingly rely on lay leaders to lead and plant churches, this could be an area for future research.

While the selected churches were a good geographical representation of churches from around the country, only one church was located in a town; the rest were in cities. This limits the exploration of church planting targeted at young adults in smaller communities such as market towns. Given the concentration of young adults in cities due to factors like universities and job opportunities, the research primarily captured experiences of young adults in these urban settings. Expanding the research

to include churches in towns would provide a more holistic understanding of how church planting can reach young adults in a broader setting.

Unexpected Observations

One of the most unexpected and potentially significant observations from this research is the dissonance between the perspectives of denominational leaders and church planters regarding best practices for reaching young adults through church planting within the Church of England. This dissonance is particularly evident in the contrasting emphasis on prayer and clear biblical teaching. While every church planter interviewed identified these aspects as critical, denominational leaders were largely silent on their importance.

This unexpected finding suggests a potential disconnect between the central leadership's perceptions and the practical realities faced by those actively engaged in church planting. It raises crucial questions about the effectiveness of current strategies and highlights the need for improved communication and collaboration between different levels of leadership within the Church of England.

Recommendations

I propose the following recommendations based on the research:

Firstly, the Church should strategically plant churches in areas with large young adult populations. Part of this should be the equipping of church planters to reach young adults with the good news of Jesus.

Secondly, young adults should be empowered through leadership opportunities. Investing in programs to identify and nurture young leaders, alongside

creating opportunities for them to contribute in decision-making at all levels in the Church of England is crucial.

Thirdly, clear and open communication is vital. The Church needs to articulate its core beliefs and be clear on what the Bible teaches.

Fourthly, cultivating a culture of prayer is essential. This involves encouraging both individual prayer and changing the culture of prayer across the Church of England.

Fifthly, the Church should invest in midweek groups that provide spaces for connection, discipleship, and spiritual growth. Many Church of England churches have no midweek small groups at all. These midweek groups should take into account the previous four recommendations if they are to work.

Lastly, the church should invest in evangelism training for all members, and particularly for those who are involved in church planting. Church plants should have a culture of evangelism as soon as they are planted.

I also recommend that some further research is carried out into churches that are reaching young adults in towns and rural areas and that research should be carried out on non-Anglican churches who are reaching young adults for the purposes of sharing best practice across denominational boundaries.

Postscript

As church attendance continues to decline in the Church of England and the average age continues to increase, the church has invested resources into planting new

churches to reach new people, particularly young people. It has been a real privilege to spend some time talking to people who are leading innovative churches that are seeing numbers of young people become Christians. It has also been a joy to speak to young adults who have received the ministry of these churches and for them to articulate the difference that the gospel has made in their lives through these churches.

It is my prayer that as the Church of England continues to learn from best practice as it plants churches that reach young adults, that more churches will be able to be planted that empower young adults, are theologically clear, focus on prayer, create compelling community and focus on evangelism so that more lost young adults may be saved.

APPENDIXES

A. Survey/Interview Schedule and questions

Church Planting and Young Adults, A Survey for Denominational Leaders

What is your role in the Church of England?

What is your personal experience and perspective on church planting?

How effective do you think church planting in the Church of England is for reaching young adults? (1 (not very effective) - 4 (very effective))

Please describe particularity initiatives, churches or new church plants that you believe are effective in reaching young adults. What are they doing that is working?

What theological concepts do you think drive church planting in the Church of England?

Why do you think the Church of England (on the whole) struggles to engage with and reach young adults?

What do you think young adults' view of the Church of England is? How does this affect the way young adults engage with the Church of England?

What do you think it would take for the Church of England to reach more young adults?

How do you think church planting can play a role in reaching young adults with the good news of Jesus?

Could you share any specific contexts or areas within the Church of England where you have witnessed sustained growth in engaging and reaching young adults? What factors do you believe contribute to this growth?

Can you name some church plants or resource churches in the Church of England that you have identified as doing a good job in reaching young adults? (The answer to this question will be used to help select churches to research as part of this project)

Focus group questions

Share a personal experience where you felt connected to the gospel and the Church.
What factors contributed to that connection?

In your opinion, what are some of the primary challenges that young adults face when it comes to engaging with the gospel?

Can you share any specific barriers or obstacles you have encountered personally in connecting with the church community, worship or its teachings?

Have you observed any specific approaches or strategies that have been successful in reaching young adults with the gospel? If so, what made them effective?

Are there any specific topics or issues that you believe the Church should address more directly or openly in order to resonate with young adults?

How have you seen your church effectively reach young adults?

For young adult leaders specifically:

Share a success story from your experience of engaging young adults with the gospel.
What factors do you believe contributed to that success?

Reflect on a situation where you faced challenges or difficulties in reaching young adults. How did you address those challenges, and what did you learn from the experience?

Semi-structured interview questions

What specific ministry practices or approaches have you found to be most effective in engaging and reaching young adults in your church plant?

How do you incorporate the Bible and the teachings of the Church in a way that resonates with young adults? Are there any specific methods or strategies you have

found helpful? Can you share an example of a teaching or sermon series that has been particularly impactful in connecting with young adults? What made it effective?

What role does leadership development play in your church plant? How do you empower and equip young adults to become leaders within the church community?

How do you measure the impact and effectiveness of your church plant's outreach to young adults? What metrics or indicators do you use to evaluate your progress?

Discuss the role of outreach and evangelism in your church plant. How do you engage with young adults who may be skeptical or would not call themselves Christians?

B. Informed Consent Letters/Forms

INFORMED CONSENT LETTER – Senior Leaders

Best practices for reaching young adults when church planting

You are invited to participate in a research project undertaken by Ben Doolan, Vicar of St Thomas' Church, Newcastle, and a doctoral student at Asbury Theological Seminary. You are invited as the leader of one of the Church of England's Resource Churches that has been identified as doing a good job at reaching young adults, according to leaders within the Church of England.

This study is exploring best practices among newly planted resource churches that are particularly effective at reaching young adults.

If you agree to be in the study, you will be asked to participate in a conversation held on video call. Each conversation will last around one hour.

If anyone else is given information about you, they will not know your name. A number or randomly assigned letters will be used instead of your name. Recording devices will be used, and the zoom recording and transcript held behind password protection in the cloud. Although confidentiality will be encouraged it cannot be guaranteed due to the presence of other participants. Data will be stored during the project and for 12 months after the project is completed, and then deleted.

If something makes you feel uncomfortable in any way while you are in the study, please tell Ben who can be reached at ben.doolan@asburyseminary.edu. You can refuse to respond to any or all of the questions, and you will be able to withdraw from the process at any time without penalty.

If you have any questions about the research study, please contact Ben at ben.doolan@asburyseminary.edu

Signing this paper means that you have read this or had it read to you, and that you want to be in the study. If you do not want to be in the study, do not sign the paper. Being in the study is up to you, and no one will be upset if you do not sign this paper or even if you change your mind later. You agree that you have been told about this study and why it is being done and what to do.

Signature of Person Agreeing to be in the Study

Date Signed

INFORMED CONSENT LETTER – Focus Group Participant

Best Practices for reaching young adults when church planting

You are invited to participate in a research project undertaken by Ben Doolan, Vicar of St Thomas' Church, Newcastle, and a doctoral student at Asbury Theological Seminary. You have been selected by your church leader, as someone with experience relevant to the studying best practices among newly planted (or designated) Resource Churches that are particularly effective at reaching unchurched young adults. By participating in the study you will be helping the church best understand how churches can be planted in the future that will help new church plants reach young adults.

If you agree to be in the study, you will be asked to participate in one focus group conversation held via video call. The conversation will last around one hour, and include you, your church or young adult leader (such as a student worker) , and at least three others from your church community.

If anyone else is given information about you, they will not know your name. A number or randomly assigned letters will be used instead of your name. Recording devices will be used, and the video recording and transcript held behind password protection in the cloud.

Although confidentiality will be encouraged it cannot be guaranteed due to the presence of other participants. Data will be stored during the project and for 12 months after the project is completed, and then deleted.

If something makes you feel uncomfortable in any way while you are in the study, please tell ben who can be reached at ben.doolan@asburyseminary.edu. You can refuse to respond to any or all of the questions, and you will be able to withdraw from the process at any time without penalty.

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Signing this paper means that you have read this or had it read to you, and that you want to be in the study. If you do not want to be in the study, do not sign this form. Being in the study is up to you, and no one will be upset if you do not sign this paper or even if you change your mind later. You agree that you have been told about this study and why it is being done and what to do. You also confirm you are over 18 years of age.

Signature of Person Agreeing to be in the Study

Date Signed

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