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Community and Commitment in the Church of England

Lynn Revell
PhD Thesis
University of Kent at Canterbury, June 2000

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Abstract

Community and Commitment in the Church of England

Lynn Revell, University of Kent at Canterbury, June 2000

This thesis is a case study of two Church of England congregations in Kent. It describes and analyses the members' understanding of their commitment to the church and the relationships forged within it.

Members of the church congregations were found to be unwilling to participate in evangelism and were uncertain about sharing their commitment with either friends, family or a future generation. The most active core members of the church did not hold any shared religious or moral belief to be an essential aspect of their commitment to the church. Instead they celebrated diversity and difference within their own church and within the church more generally.

The thesis examines the nature of the congregations' religious commitment in the light of the decline of mainstream religion and the growth of New Age spirituality. It places the congregations' understanding of community in the context both of the classical understanding of community and the contemporary debate between communitarianism and liberalism. The thesis argues that the members of the two congregations held in common a clear understanding of the importance of community. Moreover core members defined their community in terms of belonging rather than of a particular shared set of beliefs.

The thesis concludes that although members use traditional language to describe the nature of their community, those communities have little in common with those imagined by classical sociology, and members' commitment to the two churches could be characterised as an entirely contemporary expression of religiosity.

Contents

Abstract		2
Acknowledgements		4
Chapter 1	Introduction	5
Chapter 2	A sociology of church-going	22
Chapter 3	A changed church	47
Chapter 4	The significance of commitment	61
Chapter 5	The communication of commitment	88
Chapter 6	The value of community	120
Chapter 7	The destruction of community	142
Chapter 8	A belief in belonging	167
Chapter 9	Conclusion	202
Appendices	Questionnaire	211
	Questionnaire results	227
Bibliography		235

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Chapter 1

Introduction

This thesis is a study of church attendance in the Church of England. It is based on the findings generated from questionnaires and interviews in two separate congregations in Kent. It examines the nature of church attendance, the social and demographic factors associated with people who regularly attend church and their relationships with one another, the rest of the congregation and the wider church. The twin issues of the nature of church commitment and the significance of the idea of community to the members of both congregations underpin the rationale for the research and the wider discussion in the thesis.

There are two features which define this study and which should be stated at the outset. The first is that although the focus of this research is religious, the nature of the research is sociological.[1] It attempts to analyse church attendance, the discussions surrounding church membership and the views of church members as social phenomena. Although church doctrine, religious views and Christian ethics are all discussed to varying degrees, the discussion is always situated within a sociological framework of these issues.

The second feature is that the thesis is primarily concerned with the laity of the Church of England. Although the views of ministers, information from policy documents and church texts are considered, it is the beliefs, opinions and perceptions of the laity that form the substance of the research.

The one single fact that people are most likely to know about mainstream religion generally and the Church of England specifically is that it is declining. Every year the press reports that more and more people have left the church, and that while other religions and religious traditions continue to grow and gain influence, membership of the Church of England slumps.[2] David Martin once commented that the decline of religion was such an obsession, even among sociologists, that students of religion are forced to 'explain' and justify their interest in a 'non-existent subject' (Martin, D. 1969: 63). As a student of religion it seems appropriate to justify the subject matter of this thesis at its beginning.

The picture in the middle

Other issues apart from the nature of mainstream religiosity have dominated the recent sociology of religion. The interest in sects, new religious movements and the religious beliefs of individuals has exercised a far stronger pull on the imagination of sociologists than the mainstream churches. Although some sociologists have justified this interest as a product of the changing nature of religion in society, (Giddens, A. 1991: 477) it remains true that the modern mainstream is largely ignored. In her essay on NRMs, the sociologist of religion, Barker notes

that, not only are such movements sometimes 'heralded as the vanguard of a new religious revival - the dawn of a new religious consciousness', but that a large, some might say disproportionate number of sociologists have been attracted to the study of the movements (Barker, E. 1985: 36).

Although it would be hard to establish a link between the two trends, it is the case that at the same time as there has been a keen sociological interest in the unorthodox manifestations of religion there has been a lack of interest in the mainstream. There are relatively few studies or surveys on the religious beliefs and practices of the ordinary men and women who attend church (Gill, R. 1993: 15). Davie believes that in the sociology of religion there is a 'serious imbalance of material which cannot be ignored' and that the picture in the middle remains alarmingly blurred (Davie, G. 1995: 6).

If this neglect is characteristic of mainstream religion generally, it is also true of the specific question of religious commitment in mainstream religion. In 1965 the American sociologists of religion, Glock and Stark noticed that the questions of what religion means to different people and of how they communicate that commitment had been approached by sociologists, but 'the efforts had been surprisingly few and, on careful examination incomplete' (Glock, C. and Stark, R. 1965: 19). Thirty years later, further studies in this area are still rare.

This thesis is concerned with discovering what the picture in the middle looks like. The parameters of the empirical research are narrow, my questionnaires were given to members from only two churches and my interviewees were taken from only four churches, three of which are organised in a team ministry. However I hope that in some way the picture generated by my research will provide an insight into the dynamics and features of congregations of this type.

In the introduction to their much larger survey of the church in rural England, Davies, Watkins and Winter acknowledge the problems associated with research using questionnaires: 'they are sometimes seen as providing a mere snapshot in time with attendant dangers of ignoring dynamic processes of social change' (Davies, D. et al 1991: 3). Davies, Watkins and Winter attempted to address this problem in a number of ways, including retrospective questioning, a review of past literature and situating their findings in the current discussion. I have used similar approaches in order to ensure that my research is as relevant to an understanding of the wider church as possible.

It is also the case that where there is such a poverty of information that a 'snapshot' that is carefully situated and considered can be a useful source of information for the researcher eager to know more about an unexplored topic. Ignorance about a topic may not on its own be a complete justification for undertaking research on a subject but it does serve as useful starting point.

Tradition

A second reason for undertaking research in the Church of England is that the discussion of mainstream religion has an important and significant place in the development of the sociology of religion and sociology more generally. The themes of the sacred in society, the significance of participation and commitment, the relationship between belief and behaviour and the importance of community are central to the early discourses of the classical sociologists. Many of the concerns of the early sociologists were focused on the issues raised by the place of mainstream religion in society; as such an important element of the sociological tradition is the study of mainstream religion (Nisbet, R. 1976: 221).

The study of the modern manifestation of mainstream religion retains its significance for sociological thinking, although it does so for different reasons. Despite the confusion and contradictions generated by the secularisation thesis it situated organised religion at the heart of the debate and made the decline or growth of the churches one of the significant issues in the sociology of religion.

Beckford argues that the classical sociological tradition viewed religion from within a particular set of principles. The current interest in the New Age and less tangible manifestations of religion reflects a shift in the understanding of what constitutes religion. The contemporary investigation of religion is characterised by its own concerns and preoccupations, namely the search for the meaning of belief and behaviour in a world where the two seem to be divorced. In this context the study of groups (albeit groups in decline) where the marriage between belief and belonging appears to be intact, where organisation and structures are still important, becomes something very different. To study the Church of England in the twenty-first century is no longer to study the mainstream but the lives of a minority group (Sissons, P. 1971: 62). In a society where other denominations and other religions are considered important expressions of religiosity, a study of the Church of England becomes the study of the pursuit of a minority. In this context a study of the Church of England still provides opportunities for exploring contemporary religious life, albeit within narrower parameters than in the past.

Community

In the introduction to his book on the relationship between ethics and church membership, Robin Gill notes that, although there is 'much discussion today of the importance of communities as carriers of moral virtues', there is 'an odd vagueness' about the actual communities involved (Gill, R. 1999: 1). The last justification for research into the Church of England is that its congregations are conceivably examples of the communities that Gill refers to.

In the 1990s the idea of community was the subject of discussion in a variety of fields from theology to education, from political philosophy to party politics. The potential significance and importance of community was constantly debated and reflected upon. The idea of congregations as communities is suggested in several ways. The Church itself considers itself to be a community, and individual members of the congregations I studied clearly conceived of themselves as communities of some kind.

The research into the congregations of St Sebastian's and St Martin's was centred on an exploration of the meaning of community for the people who belonged to those churches. My aim was to understand both how the idea of community shaped their identity as church members and exactly what kind of community they believed themselves to be.

I also wanted to know what membership of a community meant to them as part of their membership of a church. Did they see irregular churchgoers or Christians who never went to church as part of their community? Was their community defined by beliefs or did they associate behaviour (either moral or church attendance) with membership of their community? Did they believe that their community was different from other communities, and how did they understand their relationship with other members of the community?

The focus in this study on the laity is related to the exploration of the meaning of community. The laity of the Church of England are a particularly interesting focus for a study of community and mainstream religious behaviour. As the laity of the Church of England they are committed to an organisation that is supported by the state and whose structures and teachings are to some extent enforced by law. Yet as individuals who constitute the 'grass roots up and down the length and breadth of England' (Moyser, G. 1985: 2) they are a minority of activists in a population which is indifferent to organised religion and the communities to which they belong.

In exploring the relationships between church members and the nature of their beliefs, perceptions and definitions of their membership of a church I hope to show that as communities, the two churches I studied shared several distinctive features. Far from being random gatherings of individuals with disparate beliefs, they are bound by shared beliefs of a specific nature. The discontinuity between belief and belonging that is described by Davie in *Religion in Britain* is not true of the members of the church I investigated. Similarly the nature of those shared beliefs were markedly different from the beliefs and morals described by Gill in *Churchgoing and Christian Ethics*. Where his research showed that church members share a distinctive moral outlook on a number of issues (Gill, R. 1999: 197), I found that they were more likely to share beliefs about the nature of their own membership, they were communities formed by a belief in belonging.

In the discussion of my data or the wider sociological debates on community and commitment my aim was never to contrast my findings with the work of others. As I explain in more detail in

the next chapter my thesis is in the form of a case study and therefore it would be illegitimate to make a direct comparison between my work and the broader sociological theories of Davie and Gill. Neither of these sociologists are attempting to discuss the beliefs or identity of particular or individual church members, their aim is to propose general theories about the nature of religiosity in modern British society. In contrast my aim has been to address some of the same issues on the individual level and within the context of a case study. I have found that in many instances my findings were reflections of the work of other sociologists. I also found that in other instances my findings did not sit comfortably with the work of Davie and especially not with the work of Gill. In my examination of the congregations as communities I have tried to analyse the nature of these communities as well as the difference between my findings and the work of others.

The aim of this introduction is to discuss the variety of ways in which the church and church membership has been understood within sociology thinking. Its aim is not to explain or describe what has happened to the church in the last 200 years or to chart the development of church growth or decline. Rather it seeks to demonstrate that the significance of the church and church membership has changed dramatically in sociological thinking since the early sociologists identified the sacred as a key concept in their analysis of society. In order to discuss the extent to which the understanding of mainstream religion has changed the earliest and the most recent periods of sociological writing on religion are the subject for the rest of this chapter.

Early sociology and the decline of religion

A recurring theme in the sociology of religion has been the attempt to understand the process whereby society becomes more or less religious. More specifically, sociologists have sought to explain the decline in mainstream religions, the reasons for falling levels of participation in their rituals and the loss of significance and status of their institutions and their symbols (Hill, M. 1973: 1). Hammond argues that, 'traditionally within the study of religion there is a linear image of religion', the idea that 'society moves from some sacred condition to successively secular conditions in which the sacred ever more recedes' (Hammond, P. 1985: 1).

An answer to the question of why the early sociologists were concerned with religion lies in the significance they attributed to it (Robertson, R. 1972: 7). Although there are key differences in the analysis of religion provided by the early sociologists,[3] they made several common assumptions. The first was that they believed that religion played a significant role in society, that religion 'has the same degree of constitutive and causal efficacy that political and economic forces have' (Nisbet, R. 1976: 226). For them, religion was not the product of ignorance or superstition or of a misinformed attempt to rationalise the world,[4] but an influential dynamic in its own right. Their fascination and concern with the place of religion in society was informed by their understanding of its power (Nisbet, R. 1975: 157).

Their second shared conception of religion was that when they spoke of religion they assumed that it referred to the collective values, beliefs and rituals of a particular society. At the heart of their understanding of religion is the belief that religion is communal and shared, not individual and unique to each person. Their interest in religion was dependent on their presumption that religion was not only a powerful force in society, but that that force was commonly experienced in some way throughout society.

We know that the early sociologists believed that religion was both a powerful force and that it was shared throughout society but these two facts do not explain their interest in the decline of religion. In the decline of religion the early sociologists anticipated the decline in social order. The links between the decline of traditional forms of religion and the decline on the rest of society was an early theme in sociology. The possibility of a society without religion raised a number of issues. The work of Comte, Durkheim and Weber is particularly relevant in this discussion precisely because although all three sociologists understood the relationship of religion to society differently they shared similar ideas about the significance of mainstream religion.

The attempt to identify the forces that constituted and bound society together is a recurring theme in the writings of many early sociologists. Parallel to this is the recognition that their society was entering a profound period of transition and that religion was to play a key role in that transition.

Comte was typical of a generation of Continental intellectuals who were born into the industrial revolution and the Napoleonic Empire. From his youth he was situated in an environment in which one source of authority was vanquished and another was forged in its place. It was in this context that Comte invented the idea of sociology and the nature of modern society itself. [5] As Johan Heilbron notes in the preface to his work on the origins of social theory, the years from 1750 to 1850 were not only witness to two revolutions, but that 'the intellectual transformations of this period also marked the transition to the modern era, and that the emergence of sociology was an essential part of it' (Heilbron, J.1995: vii). Against this background Comte concluded that a new authority was needed to replace the decline of the old.

Comte saw the decline of the authority and social order provided by the Catholic Church as problematic for society. He believed that the way in which society was organised was based on the way man perceived the world. As man's perception and understanding of the world changed from the logical to the positivistic perspective so the social order would also change.[6] Although he anticipated a development in the way society was organised, he saw the need for some kind of authority to replace the order once provided by the church.

In *The System of Positive Polity* he attempted to establish a framework for founding a new religion of humanity that would play a similar function to the religion of the past. In the absence

of moral authority he predicted a decline in a moral consensus which he believed was crucial for the health of society. He predicted that this 'consensus would be re-established through the vesting of moral and intellectual authority in a "Spiritual Power" modelled on the Catholic Church' (Callinicos, A. 1999: 66).

Comte's ideas play an unusual part in a discussion of the significance of religion among thinkers of this time. It is for his contribution to the development of sociology that he is normally remembered. In the context of our discussion, Comte is important simply because his writings alert us to an issue that was to dominate and inform later sociological discussion on the relationship between religion and society. Comte identified the need for a cohering moral force that could guide society and act as the locus for a new community. Today the alternative considered by Comte is considered absurd[7] yet in his recognition and his search for a force that could replace religion he preceded both Durkheim and Weber.

Solidarity and the mainstream

Durkheim's conception of the role and meaning of religion in society is complex. At times he insisted that religion was an essential part of any society but at others he advocated the introduction of organisations that could replace religion. At the same time as he proposed a functionalist understanding of religion his work appears to echo Weber's vision of a society in which secular forces were gaining ground. In his major study of Durkheim, Lukes argues that this seeming confusion is rooted in the fact that Durkheim 'had a foot in all three camps' of sociological thought on religion (Lukes, S. 1973: 474). Despite the breadth of Durkheim's analysis of religion there was a constant theme in his work in relation to mainstream religion. He believed that mainstream religion in Europe was becoming less relevant to the moral and social life of ordinary people (Nisbet, R.1975: 170).

It is in his desire to identify a mechanism within society that could play the cohering role of traditional religion, in a world where that religion was in retreat, that Comte's work most resembles that of Durkheim.[8] It was Durkheim who most clearly isolated and described the importance of the sacred within sociological thought, and it is Durkheim's thinking on this issue that has remained one of the most influential in the development of the sociology of religion (Robertson, R. 1969: 11. Beckford, J. 1992: 43-44).

Durkheim conceived the world as divided between two separate domains, the sacred and the profane. The sacred is not merely the belief in the supernatural or the physical act of worship but the process by which man creates and maintains society itself. At the heart of all religion, from the most primitive to the most developed was totemism, the symbolisation of man's collective experience. It is the existence of the sacred that makes a community possible because without the sacred there can be no shared experiences and therefore no society. Durkheim does not believe that the sacred creates society (Giddens, A. 1992: 110), rather that it makes the

substance of society a possibility. Without the sacred, man is uninspired and incapable of becoming anything more than an isolated individual.

In Durkheim's conception of the relationship between religion and society, religion is social both in its manifestation and in its origins. It is in its social character that the significance of mainstream religion for Durkheim is most clearly expressed. For Durkheim religion does not begin in the realm of ideas but as action and ritual. Religion is the consequence of society acting as a society; ritual and organised worship are rooted in community. A society derives its legitimacy and order from religion and 'it is in participating in religious rites and ceremonies that the moral power is most clearly felt and where moral and social sentiments are strengthened and renewed' (Hamilton, M. 1995: 101).

The relationship between organised religion and the health and coherence in society is most clearly expressed in Durkheim's theory of anomie. Durkheim was not opposed to the decline of traditional religious institutions as long as society could generate the 'appropriate symbols of social solidarity' (Beckford, J. 1992: 27). He believed, however, that the absence of these symbols and the decline of organised religion increased the potential for moral chaos and the loss of moral certainty within society. Anomie means 'without order'. Durkheim believed that anomie was a consequence in a society without effective mechanisms for engendering social solidarity. For individuals anomie can lead to suicide and for societies it could mean the loss of all order and discipline.

Durkheim suspected that the failure of society to generate new forms of solidarity and the inability of religion to maintain its influence was likely to increase moral and social disorder (McGuire, M. 1992: 35). Throughout his career he sought to explore the potential of alternative sources of stability within society. In his public lectures on sociology in Bordeaux in 1896 and 1900 he debated the possibility of occupational groups or organisations taking the role once played by the family and religion. Durkheim sought to provide a practical solution to 'the problem of anomie identified in the *Division of Labour in Society* and *Suicide*' (Lukes, S. 1973: 263). It is significant for this discussion that, ultimately, Durkheim both believed that religion was 'in a sense indispensable' and, at the same time, doubted the ability of mainstream religion to act as the antidote to anomie (Lukes, S. 1973: 474).

Moral order and rationalised religion

Like Durkheim, Weber approached the study of religion as a subject that was immediately relevant to the society in which he lived. Throughout his life he was 'passionately engaged in the affairs of his nation and deeply concerned about the internal tensions of Western capitalist society' (Rex, J. 1969: 171). Chief among those concerns was his fear of a rationalised society moving towards moral stagnation and fragmentation. Brubaker argues that although Weber never recommended rule of individual conduct and that 'the standard terms of moral argument –

good, right, ought, should are conspicuously absent from his vocabulary', the entirety of his work was 'informed by a fundamentally moral impulse - by a passionate concern with the fate of man in contemporary civilisation (Brubaker, R. 1984: 91). The reason for his concern was his belief that there was a crisis facilitated by the peculiar relationship between rational religion and capitalism.

Weber believed that the process of rationalisation was a driving force in Western society. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of capitalism* is Weber's first substantial study of rationalisation and it is significant that it is also this work which lays out his conception of the relationship between religion and society. He used the idea of rationality in several different contexts (Brubaker, R. 1984: 1) but in the sphere of religion it meant 'the elimination of magical aspects and the removal of contradictions and ambiguities in the solutions to the problems of salvation' (Hamilton, M. 1995: 144).

For Weber the process of rationalisation could take a particular direction depending on the nature of the society in which it occurred. In the West the form which rationalisation took was the 'organisation of life through a division and co-ordination of activities...for the purpose of achieving greater efficiency and productivity' (Freund, J. 1968: 18). In effect rationalisation takes the form of 'inner world asceticism and self-denial, a worldview that develops from the Protestant reformation of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Protestantism does not cause rationalisation, rather the rationalisation of the Western world is 'greatly (and paradoxically) aided by certain features of Protestantism' (Beckford, J. 1992: 32).

The most significant aspect of Weber's thesis on Protestantism and capitalism for this chapter is that he believed that the possible influence of rationalisation on society was detrimental to its moral health. The rationalisation of society through Protestantism leads to the growth and expansion of capitalism. Individuals are liberated to the extent that they can pursue economic and social goals and contribute to the development of society. However there is also a trend towards the destruction of this potential. In no sphere of life, said Weber has 'rationalisation unambiguously advanced human well-being'. The ambiguous nature of rationalisation lies in the 'iron cage' of capitalism which forces individuals into a mould from which they are unable to escape. All human emotions are eliminated and ultimately the behaviour and conduct 'that the capitalist economic order requires of individuals...is an abomination to every system of fraternal ethics' (Brubaker, R. 1984: 3).

There are significant differences between Durkheim and Weber in their approach to the study of religion. Durkheim believed that the sacred played a particular role in cohering society. Weber's analysis of religion was far more specific; he never talked about religion, but certain types of religion and particular religions in specific circumstances. As such it is not possible to draw direct and explicit conclusions about the relationship of religion to society made by Durkheim.

However there are similarities between them. While Durkheim believed that the churches were once the focus of community, the embodiment of the sacred, Weber identified charisma as the most positive dynamic in society. Charisma is the inspirational quality associated with greatness and is often associated with individuals. Weber also believed that it was a force that became incorporated within the structures and organisations of society, what he referred to as the routinisation of charisma. Weber believed that charisma was an integral part of capitalism, that it was a part of 'the spirit of capitalism' (Weber, M. 1956 in ed. Runciman, W. 1982: 234).

Weber also believed that the routinisation of charisma transformed it into a quality devoid of its previous inspirational qualities and that it 'inevitably turns on to the path of statue and tradition' (Weber, M. in ed. Runciman, W. 1982: 238). The world that was once inspired by charisma becomes disenchanted. Nisbet argues that the disenchanted world is a similar environment to the world in which the sacred is diminished (Nisbet, R. 1966: 253). This is a world where life is reduced to 'meaningless experiences', where people are desperate for meaning but are forced to endure 'fraudulent hodgepodge of pious attitudes' as a substitute for 'prophetic utterance' (Freund, J. 1968: 24).

Although Weber attributed no innate quality to religion as such he did locate the origins of charisma in Western society in Protestantism. Like Durkheim, he concluded that religion as it presented itself to him was no longer the force it once was (Nisbet, R. 1966: 252) but a shell from which all power had been lost.

Early sociologists considered the decline of religion as relevant to the whole of society because they attributed unique qualities to religion. The unique qualities of religion not only set religion apart from society, but at the same time placed it at the centre of society. In the *Sociological Tradition* Nisbet groups the thinking of men like Comte, Weber, and Durkheim as part of a strand of mainline sociological thought that insisted on the relevance and need for religion in a healthy society. They were the first thinkers to link religion's decline to the development of modernity. More importantly they were the first to identify the decline of mainstream religion as a key to deciphering the features associated with the emergence of modernity.

NRMs, cults, sects and the New Age

Today one of the main areas of discussion within the sociology of religion is the nature of new religious movements, New Age spirituality and the concept of postmodern religion. A feature of these discussions is that they emphasis the importance of new forms of religion over the existence of organised religion. (Barker, E. 1985: 36 and Parsons, G. 1993: 277) At best they tend to view the continued existence of the church as a historical hangover and at worst they dismiss mainstream religion as an irrelevant indicator of religiosity. For many sociologists the significance of mainstream religion is precisely that it has no significance (Bruce, S. 1995: 44).

There are several explanations for the development of these new forms of religion. One of the most common is that the emergence of NRMs expresses the dissatisfaction many individuals feel towards secular society. In this context the significance of mainstream religion is that it has palpably failed to provide meaning or structure to the lives of people. Instead individuals have been forced to turn to alternative groups for spiritual guidance. Where the church was once the legitimate source of spiritual guidance, it is now a failed relic of the past or, as Bell says of mainstream religion in its declining state, it is no longer capable of providing the 'aesthetic justification for life' (Bell, D. 1976: 156).

Wilson argues that many sects are clear examples of how individuals are forced to seek comfort and meaning in a world where they are isolated and afraid. It is the very failure of traditional institutions like the church to provide spiritual solace that generates a need for new expressions of the sacred. He implies that the loss of meaning and direction in a secular modern world drives some people to seek unorthodox alternatives:

> The search for meaning, for fulfilling relationships and for a distinctive mode of living which confers a sense of belonging and identity, has become a significant reaction to the encompassing impersonality of the often abrasive rationalisation of modern life. The quest for community finds its most vibrant and enduring expression amongst sects. (Wilson, B. 1992: v)

The defining feature of many sects and cults is not that they foster a similar outlook to the world among their members but that through joining them members find some meaning and significance that they were unable to find elsewhere. Some sociologists note that not only do these forms of religiosity provide comfort and emotional sanctuary but they also elevate the routine pursuits of everyday living into moral virtues (Lyon, D. 1996: 21). Where as such everyday activities as work and making money are activities traditionally devoid of spiritual meaning some cults celebrate them. In this way not only is the distinction between the sacred and the profane abolished but the profane itself is made sacred.

In *Cults for Capitalism* leading sociologist on the New Age, Paul Heelas argues some cults and sects bestow a significant meaning on the secular world (Heelas, P.1991: 27-36). Alternatively some cults and sects encourage a sense of spirituality and legitimacy by rejecting the secular world and calling on their members to renounce the behaviour and values associated with modern living. Stark and Bainbridge also locate the dynamic for sects and NRMs in the inability of people to find comfort or direction in secular society. Joining a sect or other religious group becomes a form of compensation for the inadequacies of modernity.

Although outsiders may fear the alien and sometimes extreme nature of NRMs, to their members these groups provide meaning and protection against the spiritual poverty of the secular world. The American researcher, Enroth believes that the majority of young people who

join sects and cults are suffering from a form of identity confusion. Unable to find their place in the conventional institutions of society (family, work, and church) they turn to more radical groups to search for an identity (Enroth, R. 1977 15).

In this context the failure and inability of traditional centres of religion are instrumental not only in the growth but in the authority of NRMs and sects as forms of religious expression. It is the failure of mainstream religion to provide a solution to 'identity confusion' that in part legitimates the existence of NRMs. Wallis notes that most groups play on their difference, their 'superior' and 'unique' status in the development of a dogma that is distinguishable from the established church or other rival groups (Wallis, R. 1975: 9). The very hostility of the sect to past traditions and the secular world increases its appeal and enhances its ability to compensate for the failures of secularism. Once again it is the inadequacies of the modern world, including the churches, that are blamed for the continued success of religious groups outside the mainstream.

The new sacred

At the same time that some sociologists have pointed to NRMs as expressions of discontent with the secular world, others have argued that they are not merely expressions of this feeling but of entirely new forms of religion. Some sociologists have linked the study of NRMs with the study of new social movements. In *New Social Movement Theory and the Sociology of Religion,* Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Toronto John Hannigon, argues that, just as sociologists first became aware of New Social Movements as new forms of opposition in the sixties with the rise of student and workers movements, so sociologists of religion must be receptive to the rise of new movements and new forms of religiosity in their field (Hannigon, J. 1993: 11).

In his work on the relationship between general theories of society and the study of religion, Professor James Beckford argues that a failure to embrace a new outlook among sociologists could hinder sociological understanding of religion. He warns that for too long the sociology of religion has been 'founded on a series of functionalist postulates' and that it has been 'intellectually insulated against and socially isolated from many of the theoretical debates which have invigorated other fields of modern sociology' (Beckford, J. 1989: 170). He argues that if sociologists are to properly understand the new forms of religiosity in the last part of the twentieth century they must be aware of the newest manifestations of religiosity.

Beckford's writings on this subject are particularly interesting because he examines the classical understanding of religion and suggests that a new framework is needed for religion in the modern world. He suggests that sociologists of religion have viewed the object of their study through a particular conceptual framework that is no longer relevant (Beckford, J. 1989: 1).

For Beckford modernity's destruction of the sacred means that new attempts to express religiosity will necessarily take on new meanings and new forms that have little to do with the past. He advocates a new understanding of religion and derides colleagues who:

> ...consigned religion to the margins of the modern world in the form of charismatic cults, social club churches, or communities of ethnic memory. (Beckford, J. 1989: 170)

Many sociologists have also located the rise of cults and sects in the new conditions created by contemporary society. Some like Shupe and Bromley believe that cults are the consequence of 'fervent' attempts to 'create religious meaning systems that would reinstate a moral, integrated order' (Shupe, A. and Bromley, D. 1985: 61). In other words, they attribute the rise in cults and sects to the moral and spiritual vacuum created by modern industrial society. Others, like Beckford locate their presence in forces which are unique to the contours of postmodenity. As Danielle Hervieu–Leger explains in *Present Day Emotional Renewals: The End of Secularisation or the End of Religion?* we are entering an entirely new phase in the sociology of religion. This latest phase is one that recognises that religious impulses assume a new shape[9] in the new postmodern environment.

The identification of sects and NRMs as new forms of religiosity that spring from a changing society pushes the decline of the old churches to the periphery of any discussion of the nature of religiosity today. Mainstream churches, with their medieval structures and ageing members are interesting relics or even worse they are an irrelevant group who tell us nothing about the religious beliefs of the current moment. If this is true in the case of the discussion on NRMs it is even more so when it comes to the discussion of New Age spirituality.

The New Age

The growing popularity of ideas and practices associated with the New Age has generated a corresponding interest among sociologists. As a distinct phenomenon it is difficult to describe because the practices and beliefs associated with it are so diverse. Steve Bruce describes the New Age as 'a very wide range of beliefs and practices' which is diverse, but with 'sufficient differences of belief and of structure to justify treating New Age religion as a subject in its own right' (Bruce, S.1996: 196). As a subject in its own right what are its defining features and what is its relationship to mainstream religion?

Bruce argues that most elements of the New Age are cultic and he categorises New Age practices into two groups, client cults and audience cults. Client cults include therapists, retailers of paraphernalia and providers of New Age services, tarot readings, crystal cleansings, and so on. Audience cults are more likely 'to be structured around the mass distribution of the word, spoken, and printed' (Bruce, S. 1996: 197).

The picture drawn by Bruce of an unwieldy morass of beliefs organised in this way is significant for a number of reasons. There are several distinct themes implicit within the seeming confusion of the New Age. One theme is the diversity of the New Age itself.

Some areas concentrate on alternative health, some on ecology, others on Eastern or mystic religions. However there is no competition between the multifarious strands of beliefs for the truth, there are no rival claims of authenticity and no dismissal of alternative interpretations of the sacred. The New Age is not only diverse, it is inherently relativist, most fragments coexist with the other without friction or order or hierarchy.[10] This is a particular feature of the New Age that is sometimes contrasted to the tradition of mainstream religion. Whereas the New Age is characterised by its openness to reinterpretation, its fluidity and lack of dogma, the churches in particular are characterised by their dogma, their rigid structures and their resistance to change. In contrast to the New Age, the claim of the churches to absolute truth is presented as bombastic, foolish or merely old-fashioned.

The last theme that characterises the New Age is the nature of the relationship between the individual and the beliefs and practices associated with it. In the New Age the potential of the individual is the focus and centre of the activity or beliefs, it becomes the most individualised form of religiosity.[11] In the scenario presented by Bruce the individual behaves as a consumer, choosing and rejecting from the client or audience cults at will.

In New Age thinking the exploration of the self is not only the object but also source of the sacred. When the individual becomes divine the distinction between the sacred and the profane disappears completely. Davie describes a situation where the sacred is no longer a unique quality that is incomparable to its profane counterpart. In the New Age the tendency is for the sacred and the profane to become one and the same thing (Davie, G. 1994: 41).

The themes of diversity, relativism and individualism are intertwined in most aspects of the New Age. What is less obvious is the relationship between the rise of the New Age and contemporary society. For some writers the New Age is the expected form of religiosity in a postmodern world. In his influential book on postmodernism, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, David Harvey describes the 'total acceptance of the ephemeral, fragmentation, discontinuity and the chaotic' as one of the defining features of postmodernism (Harvey, D. 1995: 44). It is these same qualities which are associated with the New Age.

In his discussion of the nature of postmodern religion the sociologist Bauman argues that many of the features associated with traditional religious organisations are simply no longer relevant (Bauman, Z. in Religion, 1998: 62). The postmodern world is an environment that poses new demands on people; they are exposed to forces and options that create the possibility of a new form of religion.

> The uncertainty, postmodern-style, begets not a demand for religion – it gestates instead the ever-rising demand for identity experts. Men and women haunted by uncertainty postmodern-style do not need preachers telling them about the weakness of man and the insufficiency of human resources. They need the reassurance that they can do it - and a brief as to *how* to do it. (Bauman, Z. 1998: 68)

If the themes identified with New Age religiosity are linked to the altered nature of society itself then mainstream religion really is a legacy from another age. If when followers of the New Age reject 'the rationalist, materialist world' (Trevelyn, G. in Spangler, D. 1984: xiii) they also reject the institutions and beliefs associated with that world then the churches are also rejected. Perhaps even more insultingly, in the postmodern interpretation of religion the mainstream is not merely rejected but tolerated as one option among many (Flanagan, K. and Jupp, P. 1996: 4).

The emergence of the New Age is interesting because it raises a number of questions for sociologists about the relationship between religion and individualism and the new forms open to religion.[12] However in the context of this introduction, the New Age is relevant because it appears to challenge many of the assumptions linked with the decline of mainstream religion. The conception of religion embodied in the New Age reverses almost every understanding of what defined religion (its function and its significance) offered by the early sociologists. The religion of the New Age merges the sacred and the profane, it elevates the self over the group and the community and it defies translation or comprehension by any other than the individuals who believe in it.

For some sociologists the New Age is not only the religion of postmodernity par excellence but proof that 'the decrease in institutional religion has not destroyed religious belief' (Davie, G. 1994: 43). The churches may be empty but this has no relation to the growth and expression of religion in the new millennium.

Conclusion

In Britain most of the indicators used to assess levels of religiosity show that organised religion is the commitment of the minority. The decline of mainstream religion that was anticipated by the classical sociologists has taken place but new forms of religion have superseded them. The early sociologists believed that the very significance they attributed to organised religion meant that its decline would have severe implications for society. Many contemporary sociologists believe that the model of religion presented by the classical school of sociology has not survived the entry into a new era.

In the new era a new form of religion has replaced the old and with it the significance of mainstream religion has also been replaced. Where it once stood centrestage in the development of sociological thought itself, its significance has waned. Where religion does entertain the

sociological imagination, it is more likely to be the religion of the New Age not its traditional counterpart.

This means that two questions at least, concerning the nature of religiosity in Britain, have remained almost unexplored in sociology. One area is the belief and perceptions of the vast majority of people in Britain who profess a belief in God and an allegiance (of sorts) to the Church of England but who remain uninvolved in religious activity. The other is the beliefs and forces which motivate those who remain involved in mainstream religion. The next chapter examines the current discussion of church membership and mainstream religion.

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[1] Leading sociologist of religion, Meredith McGuire defines the sociological perspective as one that is both empirical and objective. It is an approach to the study of religion that is neither subjective nor personal. According to McGuire the sociologist attempts to look for generalisations and is 'continually asking: of what larger phenomenon is this particular situation an example?'(McGuire, M. 1992: 8)

[2] There is some discussion within the Church of England about the nature of its declining membership. Some members told me that although records indicate that the number of people who regularly attend church on a Sunday is declining there is an increase in the number of people who attend church irregularly. Unfortunately there are no statistics to confirm this claim. What church records confirm is that the number of Easter communicants is declining. In the last decade the number of Easter communicants has dropped from 1 376 000 in 1990 to 1 172 000 in 1997. Counting the number of Easter communicants is still only an estimate of the number of people who regularly attend church, as there are some people who only attend church for major festivals. (Church Statistics: A Parochial membership and finance statistics. January to December 1997. 1999: 24)

[3]Roland Robertson argues that the key differences between Durkheim and Weber were that Weber was more concerned with the differences between religious beliefs and behaviour and that he adopted 'a distinctively historical and dynamic approach' to religious beliefs. Durkheim was more concerned with the general significance of religious expression and its impact on society. (Robertson, R. 1969: 17)

[4] One approach to the study of religion is the idea that religion and superstition are produced by the inability of the human mind to fully understand the world. Its roots are in the Enlightenment and are based on the presumption that man will become less religious as he knows more about the world. Hamilton says that the most important thinkers in this tradition are, August Comte, Herbert Spencer, Sir Edward Taylor, and Sir James Frazer (Hamilton, M. 1995: 21).

[5] In his essay on the significance of Comte to the social sciences, Julius Gould notes that not only was he one of the 'Prophets of Paris' but that he gave sociology its name as well believing that he had discovered the laws of social development (Gould, J. 1969: 39).

[6] Callinicos argues that Comte is the founder of positivism, the idea that the modern sciences constitute the only valid form of human knowledge. It is this idea which lead him to believe that

the fundamental cause of all human change was the development of the human spirit. (Callinicos, A. 1999: 66)

[7] Some sociologists have gone so far as to argue that Comte's belief in the necessity and possibility of a religion of humanity 'cost him his intellectual credability' (Bilton, T. Bonnett, T. et al. 1981: 696).

[8] Aron recognises the link between the founding thinkers of sociology. Although Durkheim explicitly rejects the possibility that man can create a religion to order, he agreed that there was a need for man to search for a religion of the future where 'humanity, having killed transcendent Gods, would love itself or at least would love what was best in itself under the name of humanity'. (Aron, R. 1989: 47)

[9] An example of the new forms of religiosity identified by some commentators is the response to the death of the Princess of Wales in 1998. As thousands of people laid flowers and gathered together to remember her the scenes were described as religious in nature or that the behaviour of the crowds was 'implicitly religious' (Lamb, C. and Cohn–Sherbok, D. 1999: 11).

[10] Michael York believes that although the New Age represents a wide range of beliefs some of these beliefs do claim to know the truth. He objects to the criticism of the postmodern approach to ideology as being akin to 'cultural supermarket consumerism' (York, M. in *Postmodernity, Sociology and Religion*. Ed. Flanagan and Jupp, P. 1996: 55) because it ignores the fact that in the postmodern world 'religiously determined forms of behaviour are only one in a series of possible patterns'.

[11] There is a relationship between the individualised nature of New Age religion and the relativised diversity. As Linda Woodhead describes, the elevation of the individual to the final arbiter of truth leads to 'individualsitic relativism', truth need only be true for one person (Woodhead, L. 1993:175).

[12] The editorial of the first edition of the journal *Religion Today* noted that the New Age was proof that 'Religion is alive and well' *(Religion Today*: 1984: vol. 1. no.1).

Chapter 2

A Sociology of Churchgoing

The discussion of mainstream religion may have lost its significance within the sociology of religion but several contemporary theories about the nature of religiosity involve an analysis of churchgoing. The focus of this chapter is a discussion of the understanding of mainstream religion within sociology and a description of my own methodology. However its aim is not to provide an inventory of these discussions but to highlight the salient features implicit in the theories that relate to commitment to a church and the church as a community. Although some of the theories discussed in this chapter are very different from one another there is a shared theme; that not only has church membership diminished in importance but that church membership means some thing very different today when compared with what it meant in the past.

The secularisation thesis

In the opening comments to his book on current developments in the study of religion, the American sociologist of religion, Jose Casanova, asks 'Who still believes in the myth of secularisation?'. He goes on to claim that the theory is almost 'unserviceable for social scientific purposes' precisely because it is so confused (Casanova, J. 1994: 11). Despite Casanova's disdain for the theory of secularisation his own work hints at the continued importance of the theory. He believes that the theory is unusable yet he positions his analysis of modern religion within a critique of the secularisation thesis. The idea of secularisation may be a contested theory but after 30 years it is still discussed and debated by sociologists of religion (Wallis, R. and Bruce, S. 1992: 8). As such the secularisation thesis provides an invaluable theoretical backdrop to the discussion of the decline of mainstream religion in the postwar period.

The secularisation thesis describes a process where the previously accepted symbols of doctrines and institutions lose their prestige and influence. Although some sociologists believe it is a process that dates back to the eighteenth century (Stark, R. and Lawrence, R. 1994: 241), in its current form it first gained prominence in the late 1950s.

The process of secularisation as articulated by the influential sociologist of religion, Bryan Wilson, provides one of the most important analyses of the decline of churchgoing (Gill, R. 1999: 33). In *Religion and Society* Wilson argues that the decline of mainstream religion in the West (with the exception of America) is an almost inevitable consequence of modern society. (Wilson, B. 1966: 82).

Wilson argues that conditions, which once supported and encouraged the wider religious participation in society, have disappeared with the growth of industrialisation. The institutions,

symbols and language of the church were a part of the fabric of a preindustrial society. When those conditions were eradicated by industrialisation then the basis for churchgoing, the salience of religious institutions and even the status of its clergy within society was undermined (Wilson, B. 1966: 129).

Wilson argues that it is illegitimate to investigate the condition of religion without considering the social context in which it functions. For him the relationship between religion and community is vital precisely because religion draws its strength from the community. He sees the decline of community and the secularisation of society as part of the same dynamic within society. Without community religion cannot exist in the form it traditionally assumed. The decline of community has lead to the decline in religious authority and legitimacy. Whereas religion was a necessary part of existence because of its organic relationship with the community, the destruction of communities means that the fragmentation of religion is a part of the same process (Bruce, S. 1996: 46).

For Wilson secularisation refers not only to the physical decline of religion, a decline in church membership, but a decline in the authority and significance of mainstream religion in society. In this model the decline of the church is linked to the rise of other sources of authority and solidarity within society. As the church loses its access to people's lives, many of its functions and its authority are appropriated by the state. Secular institutions, symbols and ideas gain authority and legitimacy at the expense of the church (Wilson, B. 1966: 221).

Wilson never dismisses the importance of religion within society although he qualifies the importance of religion. He acknowledges the continued existence of churches although he argues that where religion continues to exist it means something qualitatively different from its past manifestation.[1] He is careful to stress that secularisation is an incomplete process and that the 'completely secularised society has not yet existed' (Wilson, B. 1966: 231). Despite these qualifications and his belief that there were other channels in society in which religiosity could be expressed (Wilson, B. 1966: 179), he maintains that decline is the salient feature of modern society.

The secularisation thesis retains its place as a source of debate and some sociologists believe that it can contribute to a clearer understanding of the nature of contemporary religion. Steve Bruce, Professor of Sociology at Aberdeen University, has consistently argued that the secularisation thesis presents a useful model in which to study the relation between religion and society (Bruce, S. ed. 1992: 26). In a joint essay with Roy Wallis, Bruce concludes that the 'basic themes of the secularisation thesis' are still 'sufficiently convincing' (Bruce, S. and Wallis, R. in Bruce, S. ed. 1992: 27).

Two of the basic themes that convince Bruce and Wallis that the secularisation thesis has contemporary relevance is the continued fragmentation of religious experience and the decline

of collective participation in mainstream religion in the industrialised world. In *Religion in the Modern World* Bruce provides a more recent critique of the secularisation thesis but he still maintains that the two salient features of the thesis are relevant today. He argues that the rise of new types of religion or 'amorphous supernaturalism' is not evidence of a religious revival but are part of secularisation process itself (Bruce, S. 1996: 59). Similarly he finds that the role of the churches is still shrinking and that outside of America churchgoing is increasingly the pastime of a minority.

In some respects Bruce's analysis of churchgoing is more damning than that provided by Wilson. He argues that the very nature of the modern world makes churchgoing an activity that is at odds with other trends within society. The secularisation of society means that it is individualised and its members are alienated. Bruce claims that 'the fragmentation of most modern societies makes the church form of religion untenable' (Bruce, S. 1996: 85). Bruce notes that in a society where church's can expect to find recruitment difficult the only way they can sustain their membership, let alone grow, is to recruit their own children. In this scenario churchgoing is not merely the activity of a minority but a phenomenon that is ultimately predestined for extinction.

In the model provided by the secularisation thesis the decline in churchgoing is an integral part of the decline of religion in the modern world. There are other manifestations of secularisation, but a decline in churchgoing is one of the first. This is because churchgoing is an expression of the collective, communal nature of traditional religion. As such, empty churches indicate the decline in the ability of religion to provide a collective expression of spirituality or a model of community that is recognised within society.

A second feature of the secularisation thesis that directly relates to churchgoing is that in a secularised society churchgoing not only declines but it becomes a qualitatively different activity. Not only is churchgoing a minority activity but the nature of churchgoing is transformed because the church itself occupies a significantly different place in society. At the same time as the church becomes secularised itself, it also becomes a denomination.[2] Although these two features of secularisation will be discussed in the next chapter they should be mentioned at this point simply because they reinforce the basic tenet of the secularisation thesis; that mainstream religion no longer plays a significant part in modern society.

One of the factors that marks the continued importance of the thesis is that alternative theories of churchgoing are often developed in opposition to the secularisation thesis. Hamilton notes that despite its rejection or modification by recent theorists it remains just as much a part of the latest discourse on religion as it ever did. (Hamilton, B. 1995: 166). The first theory considered here is that the secularisation thesis does not take into account the existence of organised religion around the world. The work of Jose Casanova is an example of this particular interpretation of modern religion.

Like many sociologists of religion[3] Casanova assumes an ambiguous position in relation to the secularisation thesis. He argues that it is a redundant concept but that it should be maintained precisely because it reflects the development of thinking about religion within sociology. Casanova believes that the secularisation thesis confuses and conflates different expressions and manifestations of religion; simply put sociologists assume that the decline of church attendance in the West indicates the global decline of religion.

Casanova argues that there are 'different historical patterns of secularisation' that need to be considered when sociologists use the secularisation thesis as a way of understanding the world. More precisely the theory of secularisation is really three different theories only one of which relates to the decline of church attendance (Casanova, J. 1994: 211). He believes that not only are there different layers of meaning within the secularisation thesis, but that sociologists have often conflated these meanings in their assessment of religion in contemporary society. This confusion among sociologists argues Casanova is responsible for the misleading belief that mainstream religion is not compatible with modernity.

In contrast to Wilson and Bruce, Casanova believes that organised religion is an essential element of modern society. This is because only the public expressions of religion are capable of dealing with the demands of civil society that are 'consistent with modern universalistic principles and with modern differentiated structures' (Casanova, J. 1994: 219). Public religions, unlike sects or privatised beliefs, are capable of providing a satisfactory worldview or helping individuals respond to the needs of modern society.

Casanova points to the continued existence of vibrant organised religions around the world, in America, nations from the old Soviet bloc and Latin America, as evidence that public religions are still a part of the modern world. Unlike Bruce who argues that these particular manifestations of organised religion have more to do with the quest for identity in very specific political and social situations, Casanova perceives them as examples of the continued relevance of mainstream religion. Whether these public religions take the form of fundamentalism, state-sponsored religions or become part of the political language of a particular country, the fact remains that a decline in the participation of organised religion is not a global phenomenon.

In some ways Martin's theories about the nature of modern religion are similar to Casanova's,[4] Martin, a leading British sociologist of religion, like Casanova believes that religion still plays an important part in modern society. However there are key differences in their work regarding their understanding of the secularisation thesis and their views on participation in organised religion.

David Martin provides one of the most important critiques of secularisation in British sociology although in some ways his work offers an ambiguous interpretation of secularisation. Martin is

optimistic that even the working class, who are much less likely to go to church than any other group, are 'rarely secularist' (Martin, D. 1967: 25). He does not doubt the evidence before him, that church membership is declining and that the influence of the churches is dwindling but he refuses to draw the same conclusions from these facts as Wilson, Wallis or Bruce.

In *A General Theory of Secularisation* Martin argues that as British society developed the Church of England was incapable of maintaining its monopoly on the spiritual and social lives of its members. Inevitably a degree of voluntarism serves to accelerate the trend whereby people leave the church as individuals turn to alternative solutions (Martin, D. 1978: 286). Martin identifies cultural factors created by the process itself that limit the further spread of secularisation. The cultural factors Martin refers to are the features normally associated with urban life in the West: the middle class drift from the cities to the suburbs, the loss of confidence in industrialisation and technology to improve quality of life, and the rise of pluralism.

Secularisation is self-limiting because it manufactures the conditions for its own demise; it is, in Martin's words 'a rather local trend' (Martin, D. 1978: 12). In his analysis of the trends associated with the decline of church attendance and the decline of the church generally he argues that there are no objective reasons why religious participation should not experience a revival in the future (Martin, D. 1978: 300)

Kenneth Thompson agrees with Martin that secularisation may not be a universal process at all stages of development in industrial societies. He locates the limits of secularisation in the transformation of secular society. He points to the growth of the middle class, the growth of the service sector and the demise of societies and communities based around industry as part of this transformation. Unlike Bruce who believes that 'modernisation generates secularisation' (Bruce, S. 1996: 62), Thompson perceives the limits to secularisation within modernisation itself. For Thompson the defining features of modern society act as a barrier to secularisation and he anticipates the possible revival of religion as a consequence of these factors (Thompson, K. 1990: 8).

A peculiar feature of the work of Casanova, Martin and Thompson is that despite their differences they persist in identifying elements of traditional religious life, including church membership as significant expressions of religiosity, a factor which they share with theorists who sympathise with the secularisation thesis. All three acknowledge that traditional religious participation is declining in Western Europe but all three believe that this form of religiosity will be revived or that it thrives in other parts of the world. Their critique of secularisation is based on their assessment of the factors that cause the decline of mainstream religion not on their re-evaluation of the significance of this type of religion itself.

The relocation of religion

A more prevalent response to the secularisation thesis is the attempt of some theorists to redefine religion. The attempt to redefine the nature of religion is not only a response to the secularisation thesis; it is also a distinct theory of religion in its own right. Some sociologists argue that the religious impulse of humanity exists independently of either the secularisation process generally or more specifically independent of the decline of the churches.

Proponents of the secularisation thesis assume that factors like church attendance, numbers of baptisms, marriages and funerals in church, the frequency with which religious symbols are used and the extent of professed adherence to religious beliefs are indicators of the level of religiosity in society.[5] Other sociologists have questioned these factors as reliable indicators of religious involvement or belief.[6]

In *The Sociology of Secularisation* Glasner addresses questions raised by the continual decline of mainstream religion. He asks whether 'religion continues to flourish outside the structures which have conventionally embodied it' and concludes that it does. He maintains that the secularisation thesis is a 'myth' precisely because it supposes that the basis of defining religion or religiosity is 'institutionally bound' (Glasner, P. 1977: 33). Glasner proposes that sociologists move away from an understanding of religion that is constrained by the traditional forms of religious participation and experience, and that they accept that religion can take new forms.

The work of Peter Berger, an influential writer on contemporary forms of religiosity provides a similarly nuanced analysis of the significance of mainstream religion. In earlier works he stated his belief that church attendance was an indication of social forces as well as the religious (Berger, P. 1980: 134), but it is in *The Sacred Canopy* that he develops his version of the secularisation thesis. Some readings of Berger suggest that he acknowledges the plausibility of the secularisation thesis although Bruce suggests that those who accuse Berger of secularism must have overlooked the books in which he attempts to locate 'signals of transcendence' in ordinary life (Bruce, S. ed. 1992: 2).

In some respects *The Sacred Canopy* is a defence of the secularisation thesis. He acknowledges that secularisation is a contested term but in reply to Martin's call for the term to be abandoned he calls for clarification (Berger, P. 1969: 106). Berger situates the secularisation process at a specific point in the evolution of society. He maps the development of religious consciousness throughout history and he describes religion as a 'human enterprise' and as 'the audacious attempt to conceive of the entire universe as being humanly significant' (Berger, P. 1969: 27). Man's engagement in religious thought and practice has enabled him to develop the world in which he lives but that influence has come to an end.

Berger makes a similarly ambiguous point about the significance of contemporary expressions of religiosity. He argues that secularisation manifests itself empirically within society but also as a perception of reality. Where traditional religion still exists it is no longer plausible because it exists in a secularised form. He argues that Protestantism is most susceptible to secularisation. As its institutions are undermined and its membership declines it has progressively adapted its doctrines to accommodate the new secular sensibility:

> There is the central emphasis on religious experience, understood as a "feeling of absolute dependence". All dogmatic formulations are relativised on this basis. All "supernatural" elements in the Christian tradition are de-emphasised in favour of a "natural religion" in which both reason and emotion will be satisfied. (Berger, P. 1969: 159)

The church and its members continue to exist but it is a secular church and its members part of a tradition that has been 'de-emphasised'. Churchgoing may persist in certain areas or among particular groups but in a secular society it is not part of the human enterprise to create and establish a sacred cosmos. Rather churchgoing is indicative of the absence of this sacred cosmos in modern society.

Berger believes that there are new expressions of religiosity in secular society. Churchgoing has declined but there are alternative forms of religious participation. Berger acknowledges the existence of these other forms of religion, or privatised religion, but argues that they are a diminished expression of religiosity. Privatised religion lacks the 'common, binding quality' of traditional religion. It is incapable of 'constructing a common world within which all of social life receives ultimate meaning binding on everybody' (Berger, P. 1969: 133). It is a form of religiosity qualitatively different from that inherent in traditional churchgoing. It is individualised and personal, it is not part of the society or the common world but lives in the minds and hearts of individuals.

Ultimately Berger is referring to a process whereby churchgoing and religiosity have become divorced from one another. Proponents of the secularisation thesis presumed that these elements were bound together in some way. Churchgoing was not interchangeable with religion but the two were intertwined and churchgoing was considered one indicator (among others) of the levels of religiosity within society. Writers like Berger acknowledge the decline of church-sbased religiosity but attempt to relocate and identify the sacred in alternative spheres.

In *The Sacred Canopy* he argues that because the secularisation process, religion is potentially relocated to the fertile area of the sect:

> The reaffirmation of the orthodox objectivity's in the secularising–pluralising situation, then entails the maintenance of sectarian forms of socio-religious organisation. The sect in its classical sociology of religion conception, serves as the model for organising a

> cogitative minority against a hostile or at least non-believing milieu. (Berger, P. 1989: 164)

Berger's work is ambiguous on the question of religion and churchgoing. He knows that churchgoing and other manifestations of organised religion are declining. Alternatively he yearns to identify the sacred in a world where the churches are vanishing before his eyes. He writes that the new forms of religiosity amount to less in every way than their predecessors but this diminished shadow of the sacred is preferable to him than no sacred at all.

Other theorists are less ambiguous than Berger in relation to the significance of churchgoing.

The writings of American thinkers, Stark and Bainbridge provide one of the most hostile responses to the secularisation thesis and the idea that there is a decline in churchgoing. They argue that as a term within the sociology of religion it never had a theoretical function. Rather it was always a term whose main use was both ideological and polemical. Their theory is partly based on their attempt to discredit the major tenets behind the secularisation thesis. In a collaboration with Lawrence Iannaccone, Stark argues that there never was a 'golden age' of churchgoing and that generally churchgoing is not necessarily an indicator of religious feeling (Stark, R. and Iannaccone, L. 1994: 243).

In *The Future of Religion: Secularisation, Revival and Cult Formation,* Stark and Bainbridge look to the conditions created by secularisation to restrict and contain the further decline of religion. However the religion they conceive of is qualitatively different from that associated with organised religion. They argue that by undermining mainstream religion, secularisation creates a vacuum in society that can only be filled by a resurgence of religiosity.

In this way secularisation stimulates a religious revival in the form of new religious movements and cults. The decline of mainstream religion is offset by the development of new religions. Once again the link between religiosity and the condition of the mainstream religions is minimised. In this case the relationship between secularisation and religious feeling more generally is weakened because the continued growth of religion is identified with the vacuum left by traditional religious beliefs and practices.

Bruce argues that this theory is tantamount to arguing 'that secularisation is impossible' (Bruce, S. 1996: 188). However it is important to remember that Stark and Bainbridge are not arguing that religion remains unchanged but that it is relocated to other areas. They like other theorists believe that unless sociologists are prepared to accept that religion is now found in spheres outside of churchgoing and other expressions of mainstream religion they are likely to continue to misread the sociological signposts (Beckford, J. 1992: 170).

Separation and deregulation

The theory that religion is relocated to other spheres in the modern world has several consequences for the way in which sociologists have approached the relationship between belief and practice. The presumption behind the secularisation thesis was that belief and practice were linked, hence the conclusions that were drawn from a decline in church attendance and participation in church-based rites of passage.

Once religion is relocated to spheres other than the public and the institutional these conclusions are no longer valid. If religiosity can be expressed through other channels, especially the personal and the private, then outward signs of behaviour are no longer reliable measurements of the condition of religion. In a sense the relocation of religion is the prerequisite for the divorce between religious belief and religious behaviour.

Gill labels this particular approach to the analysis of modern religion as separation theory. According to Gill, separation theory is likely to presume that religious beliefs and practices are variables 'which can be quite independent of each other'(Gill, R. 1999: 63). He goes on to note that it is the work of Grace Davie that has been most influential in developing this outlook.

Davie's book, *Religion in Britain: Believing without Belonging* is an interesting addition to the debate on modern churchgoing for several reasons. Davie argues that it is not secularisation itself that undermines church attendance. Instead she locates the biggest threat to the church in the 'drifting of belief away from anything that might be termed orthodoxy' (Davie, G. 1996: xi). Davie argues that the majority of people in Britain are interested in religious issues, they are unchurched rather than secular, and that surveys show that individuals still hold beliefs that can be described as religious. That these beliefs are difficult to define and categorise is reflected in the number of terms used to describe beliefs outside organised religion: privatised religion, implicit religion, invisible religion, folk religion, common religion or popular religion (Davie, G. 1996: 74).

For Davie the pertinent point about these beliefs is that they do not exist in a vacuum and neither are they self-generating. These beliefs are not linked to behaviour but their origins are in the cultural legacy of the tradition of organised religion. That for the majority of individuals, belief and religious behaviour are no longer intertwined is due to the increasing fragmentation of society where individuals are less likely to participate in any form of organisation. In their research on the relationship between belief and belonging, Winter and Short discovered that the majority of people did not even want to be associated with organised religion let alone the actuality of participation.[7] In this scenario the separation between belief and behaviour is not a comment on the state of religion or evidence of secularisation, it is merely an expression of the dominant trend towards individualisation in society.

The relocation of religion to individual or private religiosity means that people can believe but not go to church as well as go to church and not believe. Although there is evidence to suggest that there is a relationship between belief and participation in organised religion, [8] Davie maintains that where belief and belonging are matched it is accidental. In one sense the conclusions from my case study call this assumption into question. As definable groups within society, the two congregations I studied not only shared a certain belief about the significance of their community but that belief actively bound them to a particular community. In this context at least belief and belonging were intertwined.

Although Gill identifies separation theory as a distinct theory in its own right, it is really a development of the central ideas behind the relocation of religion. Davie treats activity and belief as individual variables but this is inevitable once the sacred is freed from the confines of organised religion. Once commentators identified religion in forms that were not communal or bound by shared symbols or rites then they were bound to perceive the component parts of religiosity apart from one another.

In *Religion and Advanced Industrial Society*, James Beckford, Professor of Sociology at Warwick University, describes this process as the deregulation of religion. He urges sociologists to move away from the habit of presuming that religion has a social function or that its primary role is to supply meaning. He argues that the social conditions which allowed religion to operate in this manner and which also meant that its dominant form was collective participation are gone. As he notes, we must take into account 'the deceptively simple fact that we no longer live in industrial societies of the kind depicted by the founding generation of Western sociologist' (Beckford, J. 1992: 169).

Beckford believes that religion has 'come adrift from its former points of anchorage' (Beckford, J. 1992: 170), it is deregulated, or as Davie would have it, belief is sustainable without belonging. In other words where expressions of religiosity persist, as in church attendance, no wider significance can any longer be attributed to them.

A cultural theory of churchgoing

Robin Gill proposes the last theory of churchgoing discussed in this chapter. His work on the issue of churchgoing stands apart from the theories discussed previously in several ways. Although his aim is to investigate the nature of churchgoing rather than assess its significance he is concerned to show that churchgoing influences other spheres of social life. Unlike Davie he believes that churchgoing and beliefs are not independent variables. More specifically he believes that it is 'churchgoing which fosters and sustains a distinctive culture of beliefs and values' (Gill, R. 1996:64).

Gill calls this theory a cultural theory of churchgoing. Although this culture changes over time and between societies and denominations, overall there are distinctive values and forms of behaviour that are associated with churchgoing. Gill uses data from attitude surveys gathered over the last 50 years, data from his own research and other international data to substantiate his ideas. He believes that although there has been a significant decline in the number of people who attend church there is no inevitable decline in Christian beliefs. His own research with Hadaway and Marler indicates that in Britain, despite the decline in church membership there is significant support for specific Christian beliefs (Gill, R. and Hadaway, C. and Marler, P. 1998: 509).

Gill also argues that Christian values and beliefs are stronger among regular churchgoers. In this sense churchgoing is understood as the causal factor in the relationship between belief and behaviour. Gill stresses that this one aspect of his theory directly challenges the idea that the decline in beliefs influences the change in religious behaviour at the heart of the secularisation thesis. Gill believes that churchgoing is a variable that is far more influential than sociologists have traditionally given it credit for. Gill's theory of churchgoing, although very different from the analysis provided by Davie, provides an interesting counterpoint to my own conclusions. Whereas he believes that as a community churchgoers are characterised by certain moral beliefs, I found that although church members did share certain beliefs, these beliefs were related to the significance of commitment and religious belonging rather than traditionally conceived moral values.

While other sociologists have characterised churchgoing as merely 'a personal or idiosyncratic matter' (Bruce, S. 1995: 44), Gill situates churchgoing at the heart of contemporary moral discourse. He relates churchgoing to the wider political and philosophical discussion on community and argues that church communities, as worshipping communities are unique. It is this last claim that is most relevant to the theme of this thesis. While other sociologists have examined the significance, the size and possible future growth or decline of the churches, Gill is apart in examining the nature of the membership of the church.

One of the most useful elements of Gill's work on the church and his theory of churchgoing is that it highlights how infrequently sociologists have attempted to understand the lives and relationships of the individuals at the heart of mainstream religion. While the nature of religion itself, the lives of those involved in sects and cults or even those who have no particular religion has been the focus of the sociology of religion, the membership of mainstream churches has remained a virtually unexplored phenomenon.

A possible reason for this neglect is that generally sociologists presume that the study of the lives of those who make up the mainstream is not fertile ground for sociological investigation. Davie and Bruce, authors of the two most recent sociological works on religion in Britain are both dismissive of the significance of mainstream religion. Davie refers to the churches as dinosaurs, while Bruce believes that churchgoing is an eccentric and idiosyncratic activity.

The sociological neglect of the religious mainstream has not been absolute. There have been significant studies of mainstream churches. Michael Hornby-Smith's study of the Catholic Church, post-Vatican II, *The Changed Parish,* and Winter and Davies study of the church in rural England are both excellent sociological studies of mainstream religion. However, despite the depth and detail of both these works, neither really focus on the membership of the churches they study. Rather their focus is the church as a whole, its ministers, its doctrine, its structures, and so on; studies in which the lay are obviously only a part.

In the British sociological tradition the student seeking data about the nature of congregations would have to look back to Ward's 1966 study of a Birmingham Catholic parish, and, for a substantial study of Church of England laity, Thompson's *The Churches Understanding of Itself* published in 1957.

In relation to the scarcity of information about the beliefs and understanding of the laity in the mainstream I hope that my research will contribute in some way to a more thorough knowledge about the 'picture in the middle'. However I am not proposing a theory of churchgoing. The parameters of my research, the thoughts and beliefs of two demographically similar congregations in Kent would not allow such an ambition. My research is a case study; it is not even a comparison between the two congregations as they exist now or in the past. My aim was neither to compare them nor to show how they had changed. Rather my aim was to study them as they are now, to provide a picture of the relationships, self-perceptions and beliefs of ordinary people who attend two ordinary churches.

Although the context of my research is a case study,[9] it is a case study that is framed within certain boundaries. I was concerned to discover particular aspects congregational life, especially those aspects that related to members' understanding of their commitment to a church and their belief in their membership of a community. As far as I am aware these areas of church life are relatively unexplored in British thinking within the sociology of religion. The wider theories of Davie and Bruce and even Gill examine the relationship between examples of mainstream religion and society but the relationships and perceptions of members of the Church of England are mainly uncharted and ignored. The focus of this thesis, its subject matter and my approach to the analysis of the data generated from my research are all related to the task of creating a case study that looks at the above questions.

Methodology

The aims of my research project and the character of the people I was studying determined the methodology underlying this thesis. In terms of methodology, my starting point was not a commitment to a particular method, but rather the problem itself (McKenzie, G. 1997: 21). My problem was the investigation of the concepts of community and commitment among church

members, more specifically their understanding of these ideas in relationship to their membership of a church. The focus of my investigation shaped both my approach to research but also the physical boundaries of my research.

The physical boundaries of research

My interest in the understanding of commitment and the experience of community dictated the areas of congregational life I researched. In that research I did not take the same approach to all members of the congregation. I was primarily concerned with those members of the church who were the most active and who felt most strongly about their membership. Members who attended infrequently were of interest only in so far as they served as a counterpoint to more committed church members. This group has been variously identified and labelled by a number of researchers (Fichter, J.1960: 22. Ward, C. 1965: 66), but essentially they are the same people, the individuals who are not only most likely attend most frequently but who are also the most proactive in the life of the church.

I have used the word 'core' to describe and refer to those members at the heart of a church, because it accurately locates the subjects of this survey at the centre of their congregations. Throughout this thesis I refer to core members as those who are the most active and who assume a responsibility for their church in some way. Non-core members I define as those who attend between one and four times a month but who do not participate in the church apart from to worship at services.

Another way in which the focus of my research determined the physical boundaries of my investigation was in my choice of churches. I wanted churches that fulfilled certain requirements. This research is a study of the Church of England and more specifically it is a case study. Although case studies can be of unique cases, I intended that mine should be a case study of a typical Church of England church. That is because some churches would not have been suitable for my research. My case study was instrumental rather than intrinsic (Stake, R. 1995: 4). Finding the right type of churches was not difficult especially as the Church of England operates a 'team ministry' in Whitstable. The local churches share a ministry and are lead by a particular minister, each of the churches has a very specific character and style of worship. The different churches themselves refer to each other as, the 'oldies church' or the 'happy-clappy church' or the 'smells and bells church'. The first church I chose was known for the number of professional people who attended, the size of its youth group and the number of groups it helped to host or run.

The chaplain at my college recommended my second church to me. I had approached him very early on in my research and asked his advice after I had rejected several other churches in the area as unsuitable. I gave him a profile of the kind of church I was looking for and he said he

knew of a church that not only fitted my brief but was full of 'outspoken and opinionated activists'.

A second important requirement was that the churches concerned wanted to be a part of the research. It was not enough that the vicar or the parish council granted me access, I felt that a church whose members were enthusiastic, or at least willing, participants would allow me to gather more substantial data and material than a church that merely allowed me access. Other research has shown that surveys among people who are forced to participate or who feel obliged to participate are not 'highly reliable' (Black, T. 1996: 81). This is because the information is not given freely and because the interviewee feels no responsibility to answer honestly. I conducted several interviews with members who had been too embarrassed to say no or had been pressurised by a warden (or in several cases the vicar's wife) to give me an interview. Without exception these interviews were much shorter and perfunctory in nature.

David Scott, lecturer in educational research at the London Institute of Education, has noted that even when access is formally given it has to be negotiated and renegotiated through the entire research process (Scott, D. 1997: 159). I attempted to minimise the potential tension caused by the negotiation process by choosing churches that were more willing to accommodate an outsider. I rejected some churches immediately because they attempted to impose conditions on my research. One vicar said I could interview members of his church if he could pick the people first. Another vicar wanted to be present during a selection of the interviews and wanted an agreement that he could withdraw access if he felt it was inappropriate. Another vicar said that I was welcome to research his church but his members were notorious for not returning questionnaires. I interpreted all these replies as either polite rejections or lukewarm acceptance.

Both of the churches that I researched were extremely co-operative and even eager to participate. My acknowledgement to the members of these churches at the beginning of this thesis is not a polite note but a genuine recognition that my research would have contributed to a qualitatively different thesis if they had been less helpful in any way.

My other requirements for the churches was that a significant proportion of their members were involved in the life of the church and that church members had experienced some kind of change in the organisation of the church in the last five years. I believed that the addition of these factors would not only give me a greater sample to work from, but that the experience of change would inform members' understanding of the nature of their membership. I was lucky to find two churches that boasted large numbers of core members and which had recently changed vicars or had experienced an interregnum. This meant that the core members in each church would be familiar with some level of disturbance within the running of the church and also have experienced aspects of independence in the running of the church.

The nature of research

Just as the nature of my research determined the boundaries of my investigation, my broader methodology was determined by the nature of the problem I was attempting to analyse. The approaches to social research, the sheer variety of methodologies and techniques that can be employed in research are not only technically challenging but also imbued with values and pre-existing ideologies (Scott, D. 1997: 167). The relationship between philosophy and the social sciences is a long but constantly changing one and there is little consensus about the 'means of obtaining knowledge about the social world' (Hughes, J. 1981: 15) or the validity of one's observation (Sanger, J. 1996: 5).

Professor of Educational and Social Research at the OUP, Martyn Hammersley notes that 'we live in dangerous times for research' (Hammersley, M. 2000: 165) precisely because of the way in which the pursuit of knowledge is so frequently contested by so many different parties. Regardless of the complexities of the discussions between the supporters of the different approaches to 'obtaining knowledge' the researcher must decide to take a course and defend it philosophically and in relation to their research.

My methodology was based on certain presumptions. One was that the starting point for empirical social research is 'the observation of what the members of a society do or have done' (Hughes, J. 1981: 73). The observation itself was the bedrock of my research, not only did it provide the 'raw material' for my analysis but as the observer I assumed the responsibility of attempting to make sense of my observation. Although other researchers have noted that 'observation is a slippery business' and no guarantee of the truth (Sanger, J. 1996: 5), I have assumed that my observations do communicate an aspect of reality as it was experienced and interpreted by the people I interviewed.

My second presumption was that the most appropriate approach to selecting a defined methodological approach to the research was one based on the nature of the research itself. The problem I was investigating demanded that I refer to a variety of different sources including statistical data, interviews, documents, observing church services, attending youth groups. This meant that a triangulation approach, where a variety of sources as analysed through a variety of methods is consistent with the nature of the research as a whole (McNeill, 1990: 123). Using the triangulation approach also meant that although a variety of approaches and sources were used in the research they were maintained within a defined and operable structure (Stake, R. 1995: 108).

I have avoided an affinity for either side of the qualitative, quantitative paradigms (Creswell, J. 1994: 4) as the basis for my methodology. This was because my starting point was the appropriateness of any particular methodology for the nature of my particular research subject (Jayarante, T. 1996: 109). I concluded that a combination of both approaches was more appropriate.

At a crude level my methodology was primarily qualitative in form because this was not information that could be solicited through quantitative research methods alone or merely through questionnaires. Marshall and Rossman argue that qualitative research methods can be used in a variety of ways but that they are more suited to some enquiries than others. These include research that 'delves into complexities and processes' and 'research on informal and unstructured linkages and processes in organisations' (Marshall, C. and Rossman, G. 1989: 46).

The bulk of my data was gathered using interviews but the use of questionnaires provided an important structure in which I was able to situate the material generated from interviews. I knew in advance that I wanted the questionnaires to provide this dual function and this influenced the way I constructed the questionnaires (Oppenheim, A. N. 1992: 101). Hague and Oppenheim in their texts on the construction of questionnaires warn that careless writing can lead to unfilled replies or replies that are impossible to analyse (Hague, P. 1994: 44. and Oppenheim, A. N. 1992: 7). Many researchers experiment with a trial sample to avoid this problem. I felt that this approach was not suitable in a case study but I did send prototypes of the questionnaire to both churches and asked them to comment on the relevance and suitability of the questions. A side effect of this procedure was that some core members felt involved in the process and became interested in the whole process of how questionnaires were written and analysed.

The varied nature of the information I wanted to gather with the questionnaire meant that I used a mixture of behavioural, attitudinal and classification questions in order to solicit the information I needed. As a way of facilitating a more considered response to my questions I graded the sections of the questionnaires so that questions became gradually more personal or demanded more thought as the respondent moved through the questionnaire (Hague, P. 1994: 45).

Its 55 questions are a combination of multiple choice, open-ended questions or questions which suggested options but also allowed the interviewee to include their own views. I tried to avoid the problem of over-probing and 'putting ideas into people's heads' (McNeill, P. 1990: 26) by using open-ended questions rather than providing extensive options within each question. I was also aware that in some cases members would find the issues raised by the questions unfamiliar and therefore be tempted to leave them unanswered. To counter this I made questions as neutral and as detailed as possible.

The aim and nature of my research determined the form of sampling that is purposive sampling. I distributed 200 questionnaires between the two churches, 125 of which were returned and the majority of them were completed correctly. A small number were incomplete. This was mainly because some of the older members refused to answer occasional questions on the grounds that they were too personal. Where questionnaires were filled in incorrectly or were incomplete I

simply excluded those particular questions from my findings rather than discard the entire questionnaire.[10]

The questionnaire was an important part of my research because I was able to use the demographic data to confirm that the composition of my churches was indeed typical of the Church of England, that is predominately middle class, middle-aged women (Medhurst, K. and Moyser, G. 1988: 169-170. Davies, D. and Watkins, C. and winter, M. 1991: 245). The questionnaire also meant I could use the replies from certain questionnaires to compare with the answers from the interviews. This was particularly useful because some of the information generated from both sources contradicted each other and I was able to use these possible tensions as a guide in the interviews.

The interviews

Of all the qualitative research methods available to the researcher the most common is the interview (Holstein, J. and Gubrium, J. 1995: 1). As a research tool the interview is a remarkably flexible and productive tool. It allows the researcher into 'the mental world of the individual' (McCracken, G. 1988: 16) and it can give the researcher access to past events or situations that would otherwise be closed (Scott, D. 1997: 165). The use of particular types of interviews can help the researcher to avoid bias or imposing their opinions on the data (Rogers, C. 1945: 280), and, while it may be impossible to eliminate all preconceived ideas from the mind of the researcher (MacNeil, R. 1990: 25), good interviewing techniques can minimise this type of bias (Kvale, S. 1996: 13).

The interviews were semi-structured. I had prepared a list 15 questions that formed the core of the interview. One reason for this was that I wanted to be able to make comparisons between interviews and therefore I wanted some questions to be standard. The open nature of the interviews allowed me to respond to unanticipated developments and to explore issues that were relevant but not necessarily anticipated by me. The shortest interviews were 35 minutes long but the average was about an hour, with some extending for much longer. About three-quarters of the interviews were single interviews and the rest were grouped, either with partners or with children. Between the two churches I interviewed 85 people.

The interview can also be problematic as an aid to research. There were two areas where I was constantly forced to rethink the interview. The first was in maintaining control of the interview itself. At first this appears to be a ridiculous problem, the interviewer initiates the interview, determines the subject, knows the questions and edits the results. However the interview is rarely a passive process and it was certainly not the case that my interviewees saw themselves as the object of my research, from the beginning they were active and often critical participants.

Members participated in a variety of ways. They would often turn my tape recorder off or suddenly begin whispering so that they could tell me sensitive information. They frequently suggested questions that I might like to ask them, or questions that they thought I might like to ask certain other members of the congregation. They would check that I had asked other members the questions I was asking them and sometimes asked me if I had found that other people gave similar answers to themselves. Another way in which members took an active interest in the research was through the questionnaire. Many members (about half) returned the questionnaire to me personally, usually during the interview. About half again asked if they could go through the questionnaire with me. The reason for this was either to elaborate their answer or to discuss the possible results of the questionnaire. In retrospect I am not at all surprised that the majority of core members made very accurate predictions about the results of the questionnaire. My interviews were 'interactional events'. At first I resisted members' intervention into my interview, however as I interviewed more people I realised that to resist this aspect was not only futile but also it was counterproductive.

American sociologists Holstein and Gubruim believe that in interviews 'both parties' are 'necessarily and unavoidably active. Each is involved in meaning-making work' (Holstein, J. and Gubrium, J. 1995: 4). The meaning-making work of members was that they were using my research in order to tell their story. This was clear not only in their response to my questions but in the type of questions they asked and in their responses to the questionnaires. They were telling me a series of stories, stories about their lives, about the lives of their church, vicars and each other. Whether I wanted to or not I had to accept that a part of my own research must be to use these stories as the substance of my data. (Usher, R. 1997: 27).

Their desire to 'get their point across' was evident in other areas. When I distributed the questionnaires I did not expect a high return. Yet in each church the wardens and other core members ensured that I had an unusually high return. At one church I received more questionnaires than I gave out. This was because the secretary of the parish council photocopied her own questionnaire before she filled it in and distributed extra copies to people. At the other church I was invited to address the church from the lectern after the service and I noticed that in the following weeks the wardens pinned notes to the notice board reminding members that as they had agreed to help me they had a responsibility to return the questionnaires as soon as possible.

The other problematic area of the interviews was that interviewees often spoke ambiguously or in contradictory ways about their feelings or about events in the past. Sometimes they lied and sometimes they told stories where it was not always clear (to me) why they were sharing them with me. A common development in the interviews was that interviewees would hint at something but then decline to elaborate on the basis that they 'didn't really know what they meant' or 'they really couldn't say'. In these situations I was faced with the task of either accepting their statements as truth or of attempting to persuade them to talk to me.

When I thought that the information related specifically to my interest in their views on community and commitment, I usually attempted to gather the information from the interviewee. I restrained myself where I judged that the information was of secondary interest or that the interviewee was genuinely uncomfortable with the direction of the interview. I felt that the active nature of the interviews facilitated this approach because it established an atmosphere of collaboration between the interviewee and myself. In his work on research into sensitive subjects, Raymond Lee notes that some researchers advocate this approach as an aid to exploring certain topics (Lee, R. 1995: 104). Without this sense of collaboration and the active intervention of many interviewees, I would not have felt at ease in 'pushing' some members to explain themselves more clearly to me. As I explain in the next section the active nature of the interviews actually influenced my role as a researcher as well as facilitating my research.

Unwilling participation: the role of the researcher

Accepting that interviewees were participants in the interview process had other ramifications. One was that many of the core members used the opportunity to proselytise. They asked me details about my history and especially about my religious beliefs. They were particularly keen to know if the months of attending services had made any impact on my views. Some members would agree to meet me for an interview after an evening service and suggested that I attended the service first. I was constantly asked if I would take communion, and when I explained that I was unbaptised they would ask me to allow the priest to give me a blessing.

Although I attended services and attempted to sing hymns I declined to pray or be blessed as I felt that this would have been hypocritical, and, in terms of the research too blatantly ingratiating on my part. Despite my refusal to take communion I was aware that many members felt that I was passively participating although I was quite certain that I was observing and not participating. In effect my attendance at services was an obscure form of participation research (Reason, P. 1994: 198) simply because many members at both churches viewed it as such.

I was sometimes very self-conscious about the fact that the people I was observing were also observing me and that some of them saw me not as someone who was conducting research on them but who was in one sense a facilitator of research that they consented to (Stringer, E. 1996: xvii). I found that I constantly needed to explain my own beliefs (and unbaptised state) to justify my refusal to participate in services or to admit to a growing attraction to Christianity. Far from being offended, members seemed to accept my comments and conversations about myself often preceded honest interviews (Creswell, J. 1994: 147). My role as a researcher was facilitated by the ambiguity surrounding my role and the insistence on the part of members that I was a participant.

The ethics of entry

There are many ethical issues in relation to research generally and qualitative research specifically (Dane, F. 1990: 38). One of the central ethical issues in relation to this research was that of trust. A significant level of trust between myself and core members was essential for the interviews to be successful, that is if they were to grant me full entry to their memories, thoughts and feelings then trust rather than polite consent was crucial.

Researchers can gain entry to the subjects of their research in a variety of ways, however I wanted to present myself to them as a researcher. This entailed repeating the objectives of my research repeatedly throughout the time I was visiting both churches. James Richardson, Professor of Sociology at the University of Nevada, believes that covert or even participant-observer research is an approach that 'will not usually reveal all that is needed to know about a group (Richardson, J. 1991: 62). On the front piece to the questionnaire I stressed that the results were confidential and I continually restated the academic, as opposed to journalistic, nature of my research. Some researchers have noted that gaining entry is particularly difficult today because people are conscious of the media abuse of trust (Sanger, J. 1996: 33). Some members asked me directly if I was going to 'do an exposé?'. I assured them that I was not and went on to explain once again my objectives. There were some members who refused to give me an interview and I presume that one reason for this is that some members did not trust me. I never attempted to persuade someone to give me an interview because of this and the fact that forcing an individual to participate violates the trust relationship between the researcher and the entire group (Dane, F. 1990: 39).

However there were many occasions when I persuaded people to talk to me in greater depth once I had begun an interview. One advantage of the vigour and lack of subtlety with which members talked to me about my personal beliefs was that it gave me a greater freedom to ask personal questions of them. The sharing of my personal beliefs gave the interviews a semblance of equality, in simple terms the interviewee and myself were involved in a trade of information. I believe that establishing this relationship in the interview made it easier for me to ask questions of a sensitive nature and for them to answer the questions. Although conducting research into family life and personal beliefs are considered areas of legitimate study in the social sciences (Lee, R. 1995: 20) these subjects are still personal and in some cases painful to the individuals concerned. Many interviewees appeared to find it easier to talk about such matters as part of a relaxed conversation.

Elite interviews

The only elite interviews I conducted were with the vicars of the two churches. Both these interviews were of a qualitatively different character from my other interviews both in their objectives and in the way they were conducted. I spoke to both vicars for about 35 minutes. In the case of one vicar this was the only time I spoke to him although I spoke to the other vicar on

several occasions. My aim was to use the interviews as an opportunity to check some of the interpretations and information that members of their churches had given me. The attitude to the research, and my findings was radically different between the two vicars. As I describe in the chapter on A Belief in Belonging, one vicar disputed my findings. The same vicar said that the process of my research had been intrusive and that he would never allow it again. The vicar of the second church wanted to discuss the research, was not surprised at what I had found and encouraged me to continue and finish it as soon as possible. Although my interview with the first vicar was uncomfortable, both interviews were useful in that they confirmed some of my findings and prompted me to explore other questions as a result.

Interpreting, explaining and listening

In one sense the analysis of my data was in two parts, the analysis of the questionnaires and the analysis of the interviews. In reality although both types of data demanded different methods of analysis, they were both intimately linked. If data analysis is an ongoing process (Rubin, H. and Rubin, I. 1995: 226) that takes place from the moment you switch on your recorder, as I believe it is, then information from the questionnaires not only continually influenced the interviews, but also the way I listened to them.

The questionnaires

As the type of questions in the questionnaire were varied I used different levels of measurement, nominal, ordinal and interval/ratio, to analyse them. However because my research was relatively small, I rarely needed to go beyond the use of descriptive statistics 'and the exploration of the interrelationships between pairs of variables'. As is common with research of this extent and nature, my analysis made 'wide use of proportions and of percentages' (Blaxter, L. Hughes, C. Tight, M. 1996: 194). The data was entered into a basic Excel programme that allowed me to use a very simple coding system for each question as it was appropriate (Berdie, D. Anderson, J. Niebuhr, M. 1986: 64).

In order to achieve the fullest and most substantial information from my data I needed to apply several variables to certain questions. For example, I was particularly interested in knowing if there was a relationship between age and/or sex and members views on the establishment of the Church of England. Another example is that I needed to know if there was a link between certain attitudes to the church and the frequency of attendance. This meant that the nature of my enquiry determined the level and type of my analysis of the questionnaire data (de Vaus, D. 1993: 131). I had already considered my analysis objectives before I wrote the questionnaire and so matching data to certain questions was an uncomplicated process (Diamantopoulos, A. and Schlegelmilch, B. 1997: 63).

When I wrote the questionnaire I knew the type of questions I wanted to ask in the interviews. When I came to prepare my variables for analysis I had already established the combination of variables I was most interested in, but I decided to try random combinations, for example to see if there were identifiable relationships between members with children at church and attitudes towards commitment or the future of the church.

The interviews

In the final analysis of my interview data I adopted a simple strategy of sorting information into categories that developed and changed as I grew more familiar with my material. I began with only two categories, one for each church. I then identified four key themes, attitudes towards evangelism, talk about the meaning of church membership, responses to the question 'Should the church be involved in the community?' and answers to the question 'How were you introduced to the church?'. The object of this preliminary exercise was so that I could check that there were no significant differences in belief or perception on these central themes between the two churches. There were no significant differences between them.

The next stage in my analysis was to code my responses into categories that correlated with the set questions in the interviews. This allowed me to make direct comparisons with data produced from the questionnaires, to check for discrepancies and confirm certain ideas. Although this was a time-consuming process, it was simple, as the structure for coding was predetermined.

Up to this point I had not attempted to breakdown my data into anything more than crude categories that were already present in my questionnaire and in the questions I had asked in the interviews. In order to conceptualise my data at a more sophisticated level through the constant reading of the interviews, I developed as many types of categories as presented themselves to me.

Professor Strauss of University of California and Juliet Corbin, a research associate at the University of California propose a systematic approach to the procedure of coding interview material. Each level of the coding involves a more subtle and nuanced interpretation of the material. Open coding 'allows the researcher to fracture the data' and to develop key categories, while axial coding gives the researcher the opportunity to put the 'data back together in new ways by making connections between a category and its subcategories' (Strauss, A. and Corbin, J. 1990: 97). This is similar to the process suggested Herbert and Irene Rubin in their work on the analysis of interview data. Although the terminology in reference to the different stages of coding is different from that proposed by Anselm and Corbin, in essence they are suggesting a parallel approach to them.

I found the approach suggested by the authors mentioned above to be a logical and flexible way of interpreting my data. The constant revising of the same material but with new categories in

my mind each time helped me to uncover the nuances embedded in the data. It also helped to ensure that coding never became an 'automated task' but was one where the coding procedure actually helped me to 'see connections between what different people' had told me and to see 'new meanings' into familiar text (Rubin, H. and Rubin, I. 1995: 240).

Not surprisingly my core categories, the 'central phenomenon around which all other categories are integrated' (Strauss, A. and Corbin, J. 1990: 116) were centred around the key concepts of community and commitment. The first subcategories dealt with instances where members had spoken about these concepts explicitly and then instances where they had referred to them in other contexts. My final stage of coding concentrated on themes that were related to my core categories but which members themselves seemed to stress in the interviews.

As a result of using this method of data analysis I restructured my thesis. I decided to focus each of my main chapters on one of the core categories that I had identified while I was analysing the interview data. Another reason for this is that it seemed the most coherent way to present the information and my analysis of the data in my thesis. Storytelling and the discussion of the themes encapsulated in the core categories had played such a prominent part in the interviews that I wanted to incorporate as many of those stories and those themes into the structure of the thesis as possible.

Interpreting the meaning of the stories recounted in the interviews was one of the most challenging aspects of the analysis. One problem with qualitative research is the truthfulness of the material: is the information provided by interviewees an exact account of a particular event or relationship, or is it exaggerated or fictionalised? In a discussion of the problem of assessing information gleaned from ethnographic research Hammersley notes that while some people believe all knowledge is mind created or constructed the researcher must still decide the significance of the material (Hammersley, M. 1998: 61).

One advantage of listening to stories is that regardless of their truthfulness, the interviewee has selected the story for particular reasons of their own. Whether the story is true or not it is interesting to the researcher because it relates to the worldview that the interviewee wants to communicate (Ochberg, R. 1994: 113). As such, I distinguished between different types of stories but I treated all stories as depositories of useful and interesting information.

Conclusion

In the sociological understanding of religion church membership has gradually become less significant, especially in comparison with new forms of religiosity. Theories of contemporary church membership tend to stress that it is an aberration or that it is symptomatic of the divorce between belief and belonging. Gill argues that congregations are unique as communities because

they are morally distinctive and because membership of a church influences other aspects of the behaviour of individuals.

Although my research is a case study rather than a general theory of churchgoing my findings suggest that the two congregations I examined were not merely random collections of individuals, but groups who shared particular views about their membership of the church.

I used a variety of research techniques in my research but they were cohered by the dictates of the nature of the problem I was investigating in the case study. I needed to construct a methodology which would allow me to combine traditional quantitative and qualitative techniques. During my research I found that both types of research informed each other and that the analysis of my data was reliant on my appreciation of the strengths of a variety of research tools.

The analysis of my findings was also a consistent feature of my research as was my interaction with the members of both churches. This last factor was the most persistent theme in the research process. From the construction of the questionnaire to my observations in church and the depth and complexity of each interview, my subject, the members of the two churches constantly interacted with the structure of the research, as well as providing the raw material of the data itself.

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[1] Wilson argues that in a secular society 'there are, strictly speaking, no Churches. There are denominations...'(Wilson, B. 1966:222). He goes on to explain that in some European countries the churches are reduced to the status of sects. They may maintain similar structures but they are marginalised from the centre of society.

[2] The denomination is characterised an absence of exclusivity and a willingness to abandon a claim to universal truth. This is in contrast to a church which is not only exclusive but insists on a monopoly of the truth (Bruce, S. 1996: 75).

[3] Davie notes that the work of some sociologists in relation to the secularisation thesis is not only very complex but also contradictory. She argues that this is because the thesis itself is contradictory and because much of the data concerning the state of British religion is also confused and conflicting (Davie, G. 1994: 166).

[4] Robin Gill has developed a typology of theories about churchgoing. One is persistence theory, the belief that the religious impulse retains its strength in the modern world. Gill situates Casonava and the early work of David Martin in this camp (Gill, R. 1999: 60).

[5] Hill argues that this approach to secularisation is the 'common sense' approach where statistics of religious participation provide an index to religiosity. Hill notes that this is particularly true of Wilson (Hill, M. 1973: 230).

[6] Hamilton notes that it is always difficult to quantify religion even in the case of church attendance. He states that 'Figures for church attendance and affiliation are notoriously unreliable as indicators of religious convictions' (Hamilton, M. 1994: 169). Hamilton is referring to church attendance in America as an example of this difficulty. This factor does not really influence the significance of church attendance as an indicator of religiosity within society.

[7] In a survey parishioners from five diocese Winter and Short discovered that there were high levels of belief and belonging. Winter and Short believe that rather than challenging Davies thesis their work confirms it. They think that the form of their questions allowed the parishioners to distance themselves from the church and identify with a particular denomination instead (Winter, S. and Short, C. BJS December 1993: 639 vol.44 no.4).

[8] There is abundant evidence that indicates that participation in organised religion is related to certain beliefs (Fichter, J. 1960: 21-36). My own research shows that the degree of participation has an explicit relationship with beliefs about the nature of the church and certain theological issues.

[9] The case study is an attempt to understand the pecularities and complexities of a particular phenomenon. Although the case study in question may be representative of others of its type it is not a sample (Stake, R. 1995: 4).

[10] In his discussion of initial analysis of questionnaire data, the sociologist, David, de Vaus argues that although missing data can be a problem it is not always necessary to exclude the data altogether and there are ways of minimising the effect of missing data (de Vaus, D. 1993: 283). I felt that because the number of incomplete questionnaires was so small it would not distort my findings. I also knew who most of these people were and why they had not answered the questions.

Chapter 3

A Changed Church

It's true there aren't many working class people in our church. But don't they go to nonconformist churches? *(Miriam, St Martin's)*

In this chapter the relationship between the institution of the church and members' understanding of their commitment and community will be examined. The structures and doctrines of the church are factors that influence the level and character of commitment to it. Commitment to an institution linked to the state, and in whose rituals the highest ranking individuals in the nation participate and play a leading role, is bound to be of a different quality than the commitment given to a group which is numerically insignificant, regarded as extreme or dangerous and generally reviled.[1]

A second reason for an examination of the Church of England is because of the relationship between the particular organisation of an institution and the demands it places on its members in the form of beliefs and obligations and levels and types of commitment.[2] The explicit demands which the church places upon its members' influence members' relationship to the church. In order to untangle the relationships between the laity and their church the technical structures must first be deciphered.

A further factor to be taken into consideration when looking at the Church of England is the unique position it holds in British society. Although no institution is immune to the changes and dynamics that ripple through society, the condition of the established church is especially influenced by these changes simply because it is the established church. Changing public attitudes to the monarchy, the position of religious education in state schools and the structure of government all impact on the church because of its relationship to the state.

The affairs of the Church of England are intertwined with broader political and social developments because constitutionally and to some extent in public opinion the church is part of the establishment. Just as some commentator's link Christianity with the idea of Western civilisation (Jenkins, D. 1975: 9), the Church of England is often linked with a certain English identity (Parsons, G. 1993: 95). Church and state may not be as intimately connected as when John Locke recommended that atheists and Roman Catholics should not hold public office because they could not be trusted, but those ties still do exist[3].

The last factor that should be taken into consideration when looking at the Church of England is that a true picture of the church demands more than a discussion of the most recent developments to make an impact on the church. The Church of England is a changing and

evolving church. To understand it and the people who belong to it we need to examine some of the most recent forces which have shaped the character of the church as it appears today.

The idea of the church as an institution that was constantly subject to change was an important element of the general conception of the church held by core members. The perception of change among many of the members of both congregations was acute. The sense that they were part of a changing church, one that was currently evolving and adjusting, as well as a church that had already changed considerably in their lifetimes was repeated time and time again. I had anticipated a personal sense of change among older members of the congregations, who had worshipped regularly, in some cases through two world wars, and who were as familiar with the history of the church as they were their own families. The woman who remembered as a child watching her vicar and his family climb into a coach and horses and being driven to the church a hundred yards away has a different sense of change from the 17-year old who expects that the church will have modified many of its doctrines by the time he has children of his own. Despite the different perceptions of change they were both appreciative of their membership of something that was quite fluid open to pressures beyond the church itself.

The perception of change experienced by members is significant because in many ways it shaped the framework and the context in which they understood both their membership of the church and the community to which they belonged. Core members especially, were sensitive to the fact that the Church of England, its doctrines, its rituals and the nature of their membership and commitment were subject to change.

This chapter will examine some of the key changes to have affected the Church of England in the last century. It will also discuss members' attitude towards the Church of England as a national institution in the light of these changes and discuss their perception of both the image of the church and its more public role. As the idea of a Broad Church, a liberal interpretation of theology and the promotion of a social gospel are a part of core members' understanding of their church, these ideas will also be discussed in the context of the modern church.

There is no room here to examine every significant change in the Church of England in the last century, or even in the post-war period. Instead I have isolated those developments which are not only far reaching but which also in some way influence the way its membership relate to and understand the church. The first is the social context in which the church has worked and too which it has responded, and its position as the established church. The second is the development of particular areas of the church's theology, especially in relation to the idea of a broad church.

The established church

in one sense an evaluation of the Church of England as the established church appears to be a simple exercise. The laws and church structures that bind the two as part of the ruling body of the country can be identified and catalogued. However the term establishment also has a wider and more ambiguous meaning, implying a loyalty and affinity between the church, its ministers, doctrines and laity to a 'moderately exclusive club' (Davie, G. 1994: 139). As such there are two elements to establishment, the legal and organisational relationship between the church and the state, and its status as part of the ruling apparatus of the country.

Today the Church of England and the state are firmly linked in a relationship, which involves a series of rights and duties on the side of the state and the church. The monarch is the Supreme Governor of the Church of England and the church is obliged to provide services to the people in its parishes in the form of marriages, baptisms and funerals. Alternatively the state is obliged, as articulated in the coronation oath to uphold the Protestant reformed religion established by law and to maintain and preserve inviolably the settlement of the Church of England and its doctrine, worship, discipline and government as established by law.

The technical relationship between the state and the Church of England has changed in many ways over the last century.[4] What has also changed are some of the wider ramifications that have flowed from the relationship between the state and its church. The legal and organisational links between the church and the state may appear to be the same as they were a hundred years ago but those links sometimes mean different things today than they did in the past (Medhurst, K. and Moyser, G. 1988: vii).

Leading expert on the Church of England, Adrian Hastings believes that the relationship between state and church which constitutes Establishment has lost much of the social weight it once carried. In the past to be a part of the Established church was to be a part of a church that commanded more authority and more power than almost any other institution in British society.[5] Today this is no longer true. Establishment is not an indication of the status of the church but that it is the officially recognised church. For the Church of England, Establishment means that it has automatic access to politicians, councils and schools while other non-established churches rarely have the same access to the media or public bodies. Establishment has become a prop, which allows the Church of England to speak with a louder voice than its fellow churches.

Ninian Smart argues that the establishment status of the Church of England as the national church cannot be compared to what it was. Today the Church of England commands no monopolies either in believers or presentation at state functions. It is merely one faith and one denomination among many (Smart, N. 1989: 385). Gilbert describes a similar process of

trivialisation and marginalisation in *The Making of Post-Christian Britain.* He argues that in modern society religious faith of any kind even if it is manifested and defended by the state is devoid of 'status' or 'respectability' (Gilbert, A. 1980: ix). In a lighter vein, but still echoing the persistent theme in the analysis of the meaning of establishment, Daniel Jenkins describes the church as physically the same but a creature that has forever lost its fervour and spirit. The Church of England is no longer an equal partner and spiritual superior in its relationship with the state, instead:

> Ecclesia Anglicania is more like a charming lady of uncertain age who is discreet and sensible enough to make the most of autumn and prolong it as long as possible by not overdoing things. (Jenkins, D. 1975: 67)

The extent to which the status of the Church of England has diminished is highlighted by consideration of its past position. Two hundred years ago Burke wrote in all accuracy that the Church of England was of profound importance to the nation because it was a source of stability in all areas of society. The Church of England was once universally recognised as the guardian of society, and in name at least, its source of strength and moral inspiration. Church issues were political issues rather than the other way around.[6] Today, in every aspect of public life from education (Murphy, J. 1972: 23) to political discourse, the church's presence and its status have both diminished (Rubinstein, W. 1993: 122).

Just as the status of the Church of England has diminished so has the certainty of its identity. Technically the Church of England is the 'mother' of a worldwide Anglican communion but a definition of that communion or of the Church of England itself is confusing (Pickering, W. 1988: 370). Although there is evidence that ambiguity in the identity of the Church of England dates back to before the First World War (Dyson, A. 1988: 112), that ambiguity appears to have increased with the development of certain trends including the loss of empire and crisis of many key British institutions in the post Second World War period (Parsons, G. 1993: 97). It is also the case that while some Anglican theologians believe that there is a distinctive element to Anglican theology many others feel that Anglicanism lacks a distinctive theology (Sedgewick, T. 1983: 139).

The establishment of the Church of England has a very peculiar form today. The bulk of its relationship to the state remains intact but the loss of authority in other areas that once flowed from that relationship means that Establishment means something very different in 2000 than it did a hundred or even 50 years ago. Establishment guarantees neither hours on television (Field, M. 1988: 32), time in the classroom or respect among politicians or the media.[7] In a broader sense there is a perception that in some ways the Church of England is a lesser church than it was in the past. Not only does it lack the status it once commanded but it also lacks the stamina and the will to act as the national church.[8]

A useful church

In one sense the physical and institutional parameters of the church form the boundaries of the community to which members were committed. The ambiguous interpretation of Establishment goes some way to explaining the ambiguity that many of the parishioners I interviewed and who returned questionnaires showed towards the Establishment of the Church of England. It is also reflected in their indifference to the question of what it meant to be a part of the Anglican community.

I asked all members if Anglicanism meant anything to them. Many non-core members were unsure as to what I was referring. Some thought that Anglicanism was merely an official term for the Church of England, and others had no idea that there were other Anglican churches across the world. Generally core members were more informed but were often surprised at my question because the concept was meaningless to them. There were two common responses to my question. The most frequent was an answer of 'No', Anglicanism did not mean anything to them, and we moved on to discuss other issues. One younger woman remembered a service at the Cathedral attended by young people from Anglican churches all over the world. She said the service itself had been 'very nice' and a 'good thing to do' but that other than a pleasant early memory of the church Anglicanism meant nothing to her.

The second less common response was a feeling that Anglicanism was an old-fashioned term. It was a concept of their church that related to the past and was not a part of their church now. Similarly it was a concept that they were keen to distance themselves from because they associated it with a church that was outmoded and out of synch with modern times. In some ways their distaste of the Church of England as an international organisation was similar to the suspicion with which many New Age supporters viewed organisaed religion. Like many adherents to New Age practices many core members believed that their beliefs and practices were individual to them rather than as a part of an external structure (Brown, M. 1997: 183).

Many members were equally unsure about the impact of Establishment on the church. In the questionnaire I asked members what they thought of the establishment of the Church of England. Forty per cent agreed with the statement that 'The relationship between the Church of England and the state is a part of the heritage and culture of this country and it should not be altered in any significant way'. Thirty-one per cent agreed that 'The Church of England would be in a far stronger position to preach the gospel if its ties to the state were severed'. Thirty per cent thought that 'The relationship of the church to the state makes no real difference to the church or to English culture or tradition'.

The first reading of these figures suggests that less than a half of the respondents choose the most positive interpretation of the relationship between church and state and that nearly two thirds thought that the relationship was either detrimental to the church or irrelevant. The

hesitant response to the idea of establishment in the questionnaires was reflected in the responses from the interviews.

In the interviews the establishment of the Church of England was discussed in a number of different contexts. The first was in the context of evangelism.[9] Most members feared that the disestablishment of the church would lead to the total absence of a Christian voice in political discourse. The established nature of the church meant that politicians and journalists were forced to consult or at least to refer to the church whenever certain issues were discussed. Members thought that the publicity that flowed from the church was a positive thing even when that publicity was unfavourable. It meant that Christianity would not be ghettoised and that even those who were not Christian were exposed to Christian views and voices.

The most noticeable factor about the discussion of Establishment in the interviews is that most members believed that it was a relationship that the church desired more than the state. Church members described the contempt and hostility that they felt that most politicians and civil servants felt towards them as something they recognised but which they refused to be defeated by. They were in favour of the establishment of their church because the church could use it as a leverage in a secular world that was usually indifferent to their views.

William was a leading lay member of his congregation, a professional middle-aged man who believed he spoke for many when he spoke of his doubts about the value of establishment. Williams's explanation for why he supported establishment was typical of a core member. He said he knew that Establishment meant nothing to the government but that they didn't realise how much they needed Christian values to help them govern. He believed 'they' thought they could exist without the church and that Establishment meant that even if the government tried to ignore the church the space for a distinctly Christian voice was built into the system.

Another factor that seemed to contribute to the membership's acceptance of Establishment was their suspicion of other means of introducing Christianity into current affairs or the public consciousness. Most members believed that the strong beliefs of individuals in public office were insufficient to influence public policy. In the questionnaire I asked if they thought that the presence of so many practising Christians in the (then) shadow cabinet would have any impact on policy. Seventeen and a half per cent replied that they thought it would have 'A great deal of influence'. Seventy-four per cent thought it would have no influence or that its impact would be limited.

In the interviews I asked members why they thought that the religious views of ministers would have no noticeable impact on the nature of government. The majority believed that the religious beliefs of politicians were simply not related to their political views. When I asked members to explain this relation to me, the responses were hesitant and mostly anecdotal. Members

understanding of the relationship between politics, the church and Establishment was generally confused and this was reflected in their response to questions about their own political views.

The majority of members believed that their own politics had very little to do with religion. Although a high percentage of members voted in the last general election (88%) and twelve per cent belonged to a political party they continually stated that their politics were irrelevant to their faith. Many of the older people I interviewed were genuinely puzzled at my questions in this area and three refused to answer the question in the questionnaire 'Who did you vote for in the last election?' on the basis that this was a very personal question and had nothing to do with their activities as church members. Essentially members separated the world of politics and political action from religious beliefs.

Just as members thought that the religious views of politicians had no relationship to their political views they believed that their own political views had no relation to their faith. The separation between political and religious beliefs was reflected in members understanding of the composition of classes within churches. The data from the questionnaires indicated that both churches were predominately middle class. When I asked members why the national church and their churches were middle class, most members insisted that it was an accidental feature of the Church of England. One woman, quoted at the beginning of the chapter, explained that working class people went to their own churches.

In the interviews members explained that they felt that as individuals, politics had very little to do with their religion. The non-core were more likely to explain the high number of people who voted Conservative (52%) or came from middle class backgrounds in their church as coincidence than were core members. The latter often explained the disproportionate number of middle class people in church as a consequence of particular social or economic factors. There was a general feeling that people from low-income families did not have the time or energy (because of the manual nature of their employment) to attend church.

The majority of core members believed that the church should intervene in political discussions or comment on the behaviour of politicians only in certain circumstances. In the questionnaires I asked members 'What do you think of senior churchmen or women speaking out on the policies or behaviour of politicians?'. Twenty-one per cent thought that representatives of the church should *not* be seen to be taking sides in political disputes. The same percentage thought that representatives of the church should comment on the behaviour or policies of politicians only where they touch on issues that relate to the running or integrity of the church. In other words, nearly half of the members who replied to the questionnaire thought that representatives of the church should participate in public discussions only under certain circumstances.

However over half of those who relied said that 'Representatives of the church have a responsibility to be seen to be taking sides in any political discussion that has a moral, social or

more explicit religious dimension.' Generally not only did members support their ministers speaking publicly on a wide number of issues, but they also believed that this public discourse was an essential element of the mission of the church.

Some core members were concerned about the established nature of the church preciseiy because they thought it influenced the potential audience of the church. There was a concern that non-church members or people from other churches might think that the Church of England was bound to be sympathetic with the government or the monarchy. When I asked these people if they thought there were any advantages to a church that was not established they always stressed that establishment was a double-edged sword. They acknowledged that the establishment of the church might deter some people from joining the church. Alternatively they were loath to abandon a relationship which gave them so many advantages in terms of media exposure and access to education.

The carefully nuanced views of the laity towards the question of Establishment and Anglicanism seemed to highlight the many tensions in the Church of England's position. It is a church that is legally established and whose existence is guaranteed by the state but which often lacks the support of the state in important areas of policy like education or the media. It is the national church and is legally obliged to serve the nation but it does so in the context of a multi-faith and multi-denominaltional society.

Lastly, many of its own members are ambiguous about its constitutional position. The widespread disagreement over Establishment is echoed in the differing reasons for favouring Establishment among those who wish to see the relationship continue. This in turn raises questions over what it means to be committed to the national church: does the diminished authority of the church in relation to public life influence those who are loyal to it?

The data produced by the questionnaires and interviews suggests that the relationship between the state and the Church of England was understood within a very particular context by the laity. Part of that context was their belief that the relationship was not an equal one. They believed that the state needed the church but it was the church that wanted to maintain and foster the relationship.

More significantly the data suggests that for the laity at least, the primary merit of the relationship between the state and the church is functional. The Establishment of the church was welcomed not because they thought that Establishment was positive but because they believed that Establishment entailed certain benefits for the church. The disadvantages of Establishment were outweighed by its advantages.

The secularization of theology and the social gospel

The theology of the Church of England is an important factor in an examination of the nature and degree of commitment to the church. The majority of those interviewed expressed firm opinions on the theology of the church. This does not mean that they were all familiar with current theological discussions but that they articulated their views on what they believed the theology of the church to be. The strength with which the laity expressed their opinions on matters of theology suggests that, at the very least, it is an important factor in their understanding of their relationship to the church and the nature of their community.

It was interesting that the majority of members demonstrated some familiarity with the theologies of other denominations, or what they assumed their theologies to be, and compared them unfavourably with their own. This implied that many members identified the theology of the Church of England as one reason why they belonged to that church and not another. In this sense the theological character of the Church of England is a significant factor in members perception and understanding of the church.[10]

The secularization of theology

Many commentators have noted that the ideas of the Church of England, its thoughts, its theology are increasingly secular in nature. In *Some Secular Trends in the Church of England Today* Paul Badham isolates a secular process within the church itself, a process which was initiated by the 'autonomous historical, literary and scientific judgement' that arose with the 'Victorian crisis of faith in the nineteenth century' (Badham, P. 1989: 24). He argues that when the first scientific and rational impulses pervaded society the church accommodated rather than opposed these trends. Badham believes that today the process of secularization is so pervasive within the church that it pervades every aspect of the church from its style of worship to the life of the clergy and especially its theology.

Bruce refers to a similar process as the 'decline of the supernatural' (Bruce, S. 1995: 15). He is referring to the many changes in doctrine and practice that have marginalised references to or involvement with God. Parsons, a lecturer in Religious Studies has also identified a trend within the church that has eroded traditional doctrines and replaced them with liberal or radical interpretations of the Gospels. Parsons argues that the modern church is characterised more by social teachings than it is by teachings about the nature of God (Parsons, G. 1993: 70). More broadly the historian Arthur Marwick has developed the concept of 'secular Anglicanism' to describe the desacralising of theology and its 'consequential integration into popular thinking on social issues' (Marwick, A. 1982: 11).

Although the extent and degree of the secularisation of the church's theology is itself a controversial question (Wallis, R. and Bruce, S. 1992: 26), there are several recurring themes in

the discussions on this issue. Badham indicates two mutually reinforcing trends in the secularisation of theology. The first is the revision of doctrine itself so that traditional doctrine has been abandoned or amended in some way. The second trend is the increasing preoccupation of the church with the concerns of the secular world at the expense of the spiritual.

As examples of the secularisation of doctrine, Badham points to the reluctance of the Church of England to explain the belief in God as rational. This appears to be substantiated by research into the views of leading clergy (Ledwich, W. 1985: 86). He argues that in the lectionary of the Alternative Service Book 'it would be hard to see where a sermon arguing for the reasonableness of belief in God could be fitted in' (Badham, P. 1989: 25). He describes a scenario where instead of talking about the supernatural nature of God, priests prefer to avoid the subject and retell Bible stories instead:

> The clergy tend to ignore the question of the foundations for faith in God today, and concentrate instead on providing little talks about the life and work of Jesus Christ, in the context of which God can be referred to. (Badham, P. 1989: 250)

Wilson refers to this process as 'liberalisation' within the framework of the church (Wilson, B. 1966: 86) while Berger identifies it as the secularisation of the church itself (Berger, P. 1969: 165). Regardless of the definition given to the changes in doctrine it remains the case that in the post-war period there has been an increasing tendency for the church itself to become involved in debates that have resulted in the transformation of traditional beliefs (Budd, S. 1973: 112). As a result the church as an organisation has become increasingly plural (Ward, K. 1992: 11)

Most members were aware that a change in the doctrine of the Church of England has taken place in the last generation. Non-core members were aware of the changes and unsure as to their own attitudes to the changes and could not really explain why they had taken place. Alternatively core members were more knowledgeable about the changes but tended to perceive of them as part of a process of modernisation within the church. More importantly, the core tended to speak of this process of modernisation as both desirable and necessary for the continual health of the church. They celebrated the increased possibility for different views and beliefs to coexist within the same church and the trend towards liberalism as a positive developments.

A social gospel and a broad church

It is now so common for leading figures in the Church of England to speak out on political and social issues that although what they say may provoke controversy,[11] the fact that they see fit to speak at all on these issues is not remarkable. The Church of England has a long history of intervening in social affairs and there are clear historical precedents for the Church and its ministers to speak publicly on non-church matters (Anderson, D. 1990: 52). What appears to

distinguish the most recent theology of the Church of England on such matters is that while in the past these ideas were not widely disseminated today those same ideas are often at the heart of the church's engagement with the world.

Badham believes that the church is increasingly interested in the concerns of the secular world at the expense of the spiritual (Badham, P.1989:27). It is clear that in one respect Badham is right. The church is interested in social and economic issues and it has devoted more time and energy to discussing these issues. A more contentious question is whether the church involves itself with these issues at the expense of the spiritual.

In interviews with core members I found that the outspokenness of the church on social issues and the concept of a broad church were closely related. Generally core members supported the idea of a broad church and believed that their church should speak on a range of different issues. For many of them a broad church was partly defined by its willingness to engage in a variety of different discussions. Unless a church could engage on a number of different levels it would not be able to communicate to different groups within society and would therefore not be a broad church. In this sense the frequency with which the church talked of the social gospel and its credibility as a broad church were intimately linked.

Members of both congregations felt that the media coverage of the way the Church of England dealt with social issues was inaccurate and sensationalist. This was perceived as regrettable but not a disaster. They suggested that even biased or inaccurate media coverage allowed the church to raise issues that might otherwise be ignored.

The majority of those interviewed (95%) were not only liberal in their views on women priests and homosexuality, but they positively celebrated the idea of a broad church. The vision of a church which is able to embrace a variety of religious and social views was seen as strength and an asset. Not only was the broadness of the church considered an advantage, in that it widened the possibility of the church's appeal to more people, but the idea of a church which was monolithic in its interpretation of the gospel and in its style of worship was seen negatively.

The destructive and hostile language core members used to describe religious conduct or traditions they associated with inflexibility is described in more detail in the chapter on the Communication of Commitment. However in a discussion of the idea of a broad church it is worth noting that core members believed that cultivating an ever broader church, where a multitude of views and styles of worship were tolerated, was a significant task if the church was to attract new members. Although some sociological research suggests that this trend leads to the diminished influence of a church[12] core members were convinced that as broad a church as possible was necessary for the survival of Christianity, and was a defining feature of the community to which they belonged.

The celebration of a broad church and the distrust of absolutes amongst core members meant that their vision of a community was not one that was characterised by common beliefs and shared values. Many core members were shocked by the idea that the church should insist on commitment to certain doctrines or religious views, they supported a church that sanctioned diversity in all areas of their life in the congregation. Unlike the mainstream churches and communities that Tonnies, Durkheim and Weber believed acted as moral focus for society, the modern church as understood by core members is a fragmented and disparate organisation.

Conclusion

The Church of England maintains a unique position in British society and although the status and meaning of Establishment has altered it retains a privileged position compared to other churches. The membership were ambiguous in their feelings towards the established nature of the church, the majority felt there was no inherent value in Establishment but that Establishment was a useful tool in a secular society.

Essentially the membership was aware of the changing nature of the church and they were especially conscious of the liberalisation of beliefs within the church. Not only were they aware of the changes, but they thought that these changes were a necessary and desirable process of the modernisation of the Church of England.

The core membership associated the liberalisation of doctrine with the maintenance of a broad church. A broad church was one where both the styles of worship and religious beliefs were as wide as possible. Members believed that the broad nature of the church would mean that the church could appeal to ever more people in society. In turn members thought that the preaching of a social gospel was an integral part of the broad church. The ability to engage in a spectrum of issues and to represent a variety of views on these issues was considered an asset by the membership.

The enthusiasm with which members supported the idea of a broad church influenced their attitude towards the organisation of the church as well to its doctrines. It meant they were more likely to be in favour of changes which they thought made the church more accessible to a wider body of people. As a consequence, the liberalisation of theology was generally perceived of favourably by the core members.

Essentially core members felt comfortable with the nature of their national church. Other research has suggested that there is a discrepancy between the beliefs and concerns of the laity and the leadership within the church (Medhurst, K. and Moyser, G. 1988: 144) but I found a degree of sympathy between the leadership and the core membership. Some members were aware that their views differed from those of their vicars or of other individuals in the church, but the majority identified key reasons, especially the broadness of the church, for their specific

membership of the Church of England. The significance of this final point is that the value attached to the freedom of the individual to express their beliefs was characteristic of their perception of the community in their church and their membership of it.

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[1] Wilson makes the point that there is a relationship between the 'intensity of commitment' given to many sects and the fact that many of those sects are characterised as deviant and 'standing in some degree of protest against the dominant trends in society' (Wilson, B. 1992: 1).

[2] In his studies of the Roman Catholic Church in England, Michael Hornsby-Smith has established the links between the type of commitment and the particular group or church involved. He found a difference between church commitment as it was understood and expressed post-Vatican II and commitment as it was understood and expressed pre-Vatican II.

[3] The previous Conservative government frequently cited Christian doctrine as the basis for its policies. While Prime Minister Thatcher stated that 'we are a nation founded on the Bible' (Ward, K. 1992: 6) as well her belief that her economic policy was grounded in Christian ideals (William, J. 1992).

[4] Traditionally , at any one time 26 bishops of the Church of England were allowed to sit in the House of Lords. Changes introduced by the present Labour government have reduced that number to 16. The other 10 seats will now be allocated to representatives from other faiths.

[5] In *Scenes of Clerical Life*, written in 1857, George Eliot refers to the Church of England merely as the Establishment secure in the knowledge that the Church was *the* Establishment (Elliot, G. 1975: 44).

[6] An example of the centrality of religious issues in British politics is the continual discussion over non-conformism in British society at the end of the nineteenth century. In *The Making of the Modern Church* Worrall describes 'the non-conformist conscience' as a significant voice in British politics in every major issue of the day from the fate of the Irish party to the slave trade (Worrall, B. 1988: 134-159).

[7] An example of this is the continual tension between the state and the church in relation to education and religious education in particular. The period preceding the Education Act 1988 was characterised by the church's concern that religious education would be squeezed out of the new curriculum. (Beck, J. 1999: 57-71)

[8] The perception of the Church of England as a fragile institution is often reflected in discussions in the press and in response to the church's stance on certain issues. An example of this has been a number of high-profile conversions to the Roman Catholic church. In an article called 'Does the Church of England Matter?', Dr Gilley, senior lecturer in theology at Durham University explained why he had left the Church of England to join the Roman Catholic Church. He argued that the liberalism of the Church of England meant that that only was there no consensus within the church and that it was a church with no mystery and no moral standards (Guardian 14.4.93).

[9] This particular discussion is also referred to in the chapter on 'The Communication of Commitment'.

[10] The relationship between members' understanding of the differences between denominations is explored more thoroughly in the chapter on the 'Significance of Commitment'.

[11] When the Church of England published its report *Faith in the City* in 1985 many condemned the church for intervening in politics. Peter Bruinvels , an MP and member of the General Synod, said it was 'out of touch and unwanted'. The MP John Carlisle said that the Church of England 'must be run by a load of communist clerics'. (Bigger N. 1988: 5)

[12] Bruce argues that mainstream, liberal Christian Churches are more prone to the forces of secularisation precisely because they are unable to resist pressures from outside the church (Bruce, S. 1996 85-90).

Chapter 4

The Significance of Commitment

> *Here are people; only two or three, perhaps as sometimes happens in this country, or perhaps even a few hundred, impelled, by a strange instinct, or will stream towards this building, where they seek - what? Satisfaction of an old habit? But whence came this old habit? Entertainment and instruction? Very strange entertainment and instruction?*
> *(Barth,K. 1928: 105)*

Sociologists have examined the significance of commitment for religious belief and belonging in a number of different contexts. Within the relatively narrow field of church commitment there is an continuing discussion as to how important commitment is and what it actually constitutes (Sissons, P. 1971: 62). As Peter Brierly, a leading commentator and analyst of contemporary church membership has noted, church statistics are not only 'intrinsically fascinating' but are frequently misleading and difficult to interpret (Brierly, P. 1988 in Halsey, A. ed. 518).

Sociologists have attempted to quantify church commitment in a variety of ways ranging from the financial cost (Pickering, W. 1966 in Martin, D. 77-87) to levels of emotional attachment (Mol, H. 1976: 216). I have attempted to avoid a discussion of church commitment that is based merely on the frequency of attendance or the hours that any one individual spends in a church. Instead my analysis focuses on members' perception of their own commitment. While the frequency of their contact with the church provides the framework to an analysis of commitment, subjective factors like their feelings towards the church and the personal value they placed on their involvement are also considered.

The aim of this chapter then is not to monitor levels of participation in the two churches but to explore church members' attitudes towards their relationship with their church. Not only will it examine members' perception of their commitment to the church but it will also discuss the possible relationship between the quality of their commitment and the content of their beliefs.

The personal demands of commitment.

In the interviews with core members from both churches I asked what importance, if any they attached to church attendance in relation to their faith as Christians. In every interview members repeatedly asserted that membership and attendance at a church was central to their Christianity. Some interviewees told stories or anecdotes to demonstrate the importance they placed on church membership, others described the cost, financial or emotional, and others

catalogued the hours and activities they gave to the church every month as an illustration of how important they considered church membership. Belonging to their church, undertaking some kind of responsibility in the running or organisation of the church and the relationships they sustained through the church were all cited as central components of their faith.

The effort that many interviewees felt they had to make to be regular members of the church was frequently cited as evidence of the depth of their commitment. One woman described how leaving her husband and two young children every Sunday morning for several hours was a significant and deliberate sacrifice of valuable 'family time'. She described how her vicar and fellow church members had all made it clear that they would understand if she could not make it every week, and how this absence of pressure made her regular attendance even more of a personal act of will on her part. She strove towards fulfilling her commitment to attend every week; it never got any easier to do but gave her immense personal satisfaction.

Most core members were aware of the demands that church membership made on certain individuals in the congregation. There was a feeling that these individuals expressed their commitment to the church not merely by attending and participating but in the effort they made to overcome the obstacles they faced in relation to attending church. Pauline, a member of St Martin's for 20 years described the effort that some women have to make to sustain their membership of the church:

> And I've said this quite a lot. A woman or man who goes to church on their own. It's harder for a woman to go on her own. There are men who go on their own and people tend to make a fuss of them. But a woman who goes to church on her own can have great problems. Personally I don't because I'm not that kind of woman. But if you were shy, because people don't include you in certain things because your husband isn't there then it takes a certain something to keep turning up every week.

I spoke to one woman who felt she was treated in a way similar to that described by Pauline. The hostile response she felt from the congregation did not stop her from attending the church but it did stop her from becoming involved in the life of the church for several years. The hostility and suspicion that this woman had overcome enhanced the value she placed on her membership of a church. Not only did she give her time and energy to the church but she also believed she had given these things in the face of opposition from the church itself:

> I find in a lot of Church of England churches you get three or four couples who run the whole ballyshoot and it does tend to put other people off. They act as size men and they take up the host and the collection. And you know in the second Sunday of the month you're going to get Mr and Mrs X and they're going to be doing such like. I spent two and a half years of my life sitting in a pew on my own with a couple next to me who were one of these couples. People would lean across me to say to them "would you like

> to take the host up next week, would you like to do the collection?". Nobody ever said to me would you like to do this. Finally I burst and said would you mind telling me why no one invites me to do anything? And I was told quite blatantly that they thought I wouldn't want to because my husband didn't go and I wasn't part of a couple. I said, "well if that's the case I won't do anything", but I still went every week, other wise it would as though they had scared me away.

For other members there was no sense of neglecting other areas of their lives or of overcoming barriers for the church. Nonetheless they felt that the sheer volume of time they spent each week at the church or involved in some church activity was an example of the extent of their commitment. Several couples that I interviewed joked about doing so much it was like 'being married to the church'. When I asked Jim and Amanda how important the church was to their faith, they worked out that between them they had held every major lay post in the church over a period of 25 years. Some of these posts (running concurrently) had been held for up to 23 years. During the time that they ran the church magazine they effectively 'lived in the office for 13 years'. The amount of time that Jim and Amanda spent in the church was not unusual among the core membership. Sheena and Bill estimated that the hours they spent helping to run the church every week amounted to assuming the responsibility of a part-time job on top of their normal employment. It was a job they loved and which they believed enriched their lives but it was also a commitment that left them no time to pursue other interests or hobbies.

Although their church membership was often experienced as demanding, core-members tended to think of the personal demands upon them as an inevitable and rewarding part of their membership. This understanding of commitment is worth noting partly because other research into congregations has shown that it is not a universal phenomenon. In one of the most comprehensive studies of Church of England congregations, *The Church's Understanding of Itself*, Thompson noted that attitudes towards the duties and responsibilities changed from church to church. He also found that in churches where a sense of decline was evident members tended to experience the responsibilities of running a church as a burden. The members of these churches wanted others to take their jobs from them and complained that they bore an unfair share of the burden of maintaining the church (Thompson, R. 1957: 95).

Core-members saw their responsibilities in the church as an opportunity to develop the intensity of their membership. In interviews the core membership were adamant that their membership of the church was an important part of their Christianity. This trend was reinforced by the results of the questionnaires. In answer to the question 'If for some reason your church was shut down would you join another church?', the majority (81%) answered 'Yes, I would immediately find another church in my area.' Only (1.1/2 %) answered No.

The results of the questionnaire showed that there was widespread commitment to church attendance across the whole congregation. Although core members tended to attribute more

significance to attendance than non-core members, all individuals valued their membership to some extent. Not surprisingly the core membership were easily identified through their response to questions about the regularity of church attendance. The first option to the question 'How often do you attend Sunday morning services?' was 'Almost every Sunday'. I had deliberately phrased this response for members who attended church every Sunday but who might have missed a rare Sunday because of illness, etc. In a number of replies the 'Almost' was crossed out and 'Always' was substituted in its place and then ringed as the chosen option. Counting the Almosts and the newly created Always together, 79% said they Almost/ Always attended church on a Sunday. The results from the questionnaires alone suggested that a Christianity that did not include a relationship with a church was neither desirable nor a viable option for the core membership.

The importance of the church membership to the congregations was further underlined by the responses to the question, 'Apart from the closure of your church could you think of any reason why you would stop attending your church?'. 42% ticked the other option and most of them noted that there was no reason they could think of. 24% said that illness was the only reason they could think of; 2.5% said loss of faith; only 14% said family or work commitments would force them to stop. The responses suggest that not only is church membership important to both congregations but that the majority presume and expect the church to be as important in the future as it is now.

The results of the questionnaires taken in conjunction with the findings from the interviews indicate an even stronger belief in the importance of church membership. In the questionnaires a small percentage of replies indicated that family commitments or illness would stop them from attending a church. In the interviews it was clear that many individuals continued their membership of the church despite illness and family commitments. Many of the older members found the trip to church a physical strain and an event, which took them days to recover from. Some members described how family commitments and family crisis often intensified their need and desire to go to church and maintain their level of activity and commitment. As far as the core membership were concerned, their commitment to the church is so important that there is very little that can disrupt it.

In interviews the core membership frequently illustrated the depth of their commitment to the church with descriptions of their church related activities and the extent and frequency of those activities was also reflected in the responses to the questionnaires.

The findings from the second part of Section D underlined this aspect of church commitment. A majority of members (57%) are involved with the running or organisation of the life of the church. Of this group the majority were involved in more than one activity. From the sample as a whole, 40% were involved in more than one activity, and, of those who said they were

involved, 70% undertook more than one activity. Over a third (35%) did two and 21% did three.

Two factors about church commitment are suggested in these figures. The first is that over half of both congregations are involved in their church beyond attending Sunday services, implying that activity, as a component of membership is the norm rather than the exception. The second is that while the core membership within both churches is a minority, it is large minority of about twenty to thirty per cent.

That commitment to the church was important to the core membership and many of those outside the core was a subject that most interviewees were passionate and articulate about. Through the interviews and the questionnaires it is possible to establish that both congregations believe that membership of a church is a central part of their Christian lives. When they were asked directly in interviews and less directly in the questionnaires they consistently maintained this point. It is also possible to establish that for the core membership the evidence of exactly how significant they believe their commitment to the church to be is to be found in the number of activities they are involved in, and the financial costs and the responsibilities they regularly take on as a natural part of their commitment. The physical intensity of their involvement was not only a measure of their commitment but it was also an integral part of the commitment itself.

What is the Church?

The importance of commitment to the church for the members of both congregations seems certain. What is less certain is what the members of those congregations mean by 'the church' to which they are committed. When members talk about the church, exactly what are they referring to: the building, the institution their friends and acquaintances who also worship there? There is also the possibility that when 'the church' is referred to each person means something different by it. What is the nature of the church that core members believe is so important to them and is their church a shared church or one that exists independently in the minds of individual members?

Most of the interviewees (and all of the core members), when they were affirming their commitment, were not only able to give me a precise definition of what they understood as the church, but most of them voluntarily offered their definition as part of their explanation of why the church was important to their faith.

In no conversation did anyone define the church as the Church of England. When they spoke of the importance of being part of a church in relation to their lives as Christians they were not talking of any one denomination but referring to the church as a universal institution. They assumed that for the majority of Christians like themselves, that is people who regularly

attended a church, the church itself was always central, whether it was the Baptist church, the Roman Catholic Church or the Church of England.

About 50% of interviewees had been members of other churches at some time in their lives and many had also participated in a variety of formal and informal ecumenical activities. Every member I spoke to thought that different denominations should work together and that there should be close working links between different churches. Although there was widespread approval for interdenominational activity attitudes towards other denominations were mixed.

A common reaction to other denominations was that these churches were essentially for church members who wanted a different type and style of worship. Other denominations were not better or worse than their own, they were merely different. When I asked Sarah, a church member all her life, why she had left the Baptist church in her twenties she explained what had prompted the move:

> If I look at my friendship group now, the core of my friends are people I met through church. Socioeconomic background, you don't like to say it, but it is a factor. The congregation has a high percentage of professional people and people with post-secondary education - it effects all sorts of things, it effects the way the service is pitched. It effects the ease of communication between people. My daughter now goes to another Baptist church. The range of congregation is different – there's much bigger working-class representation. The addresses are very punchy, the music is very modern. I like it. There's very much a sense of the Holy Spirit acting in the worship. But it's not right for me.

For the members I interviewed there was an acknowledgement of differences between denominations, but there was no sense that other denominations were not the church. Some interviewees were dismissive of some of the traditions of other denominations. The Catholic Church was often criticised as too much 'smells and bells' and the 'hymn, prayer sandwich format' of the United Reform Church was described as 'restrictive' or 'rigid'. Yet these criticisms were as frequently applied to other Anglican churches as they were to churches of other denominations.

The non-denominational definition of the church appeared to stem from the predominately non-institutional understanding of what the church was. Members repeatedly emphasised that not only was the church not a single denomination it was not even a building. A church as described by both congregations was a community of believers who were joined together in some way. The physicality of the church was deemed relatively unimportant in their understanding of what the church was. Many members insisted that they would be happy to worship in a field or a community hall. Their elevation of their membership of the church as

the most important element of their faith was not a reflection of the value they placed on membership of an institution, but rather of the value they placed on their relationship to the other people who made up the church.

For many of the people I spoke to the importance of the church as a building was in the role it played in facilitating the meeting of church members and the way it allowed them to express their faith. One couple described how they liked to visit other churches because they believed you could gain a sense of the people who worshipped there from the feel of the place. They noted that other people also visited their own church and that they believed that as a building it was a reflection of their congregation:

> During the summer a lot of people visit the church, some look at it as an architectural edifice, some use it for meditation. And the number of people who mention the serenity, the warmth, the peace. A lot of people get very nice vibes from being there - I don't know what causes it. But it's a very well cared for church, there's no feeling of decay or neglect.

Rose whose two teenage sons were in the process of leaving the church attributed the growing boredom of her sons with church to their misconception of its real role and significance. She felt that their inability to grasp the true nature of the church meant that it was almost inevitable that they would increasingly see the church as an irrelevance in their lives:

> Because my faith goes with me wherever I go. Going to church is just not...I mean sometimes I think the two are just separate for some people. The kids look on the church as a building and so what they see are archaic things. Even in a new building the church as a thing is old because of its history and traditions, and the hierarchy. For me the church is a thing but for my faith the church is the personal relationship I have with Jesus and the other people I share that with.

Every one I spoke to thought that the church as a building was important, but that its importance as a building derived was from the congregation as a distinct group of worshippers. Members of both congregations believed their own churches, as buildings, were perfect 'or' just right, or exactly what a church should look like. Members of St Martin's Church described how appropriate they thought it was that their church was on a hill, so that it could be seen from a distance. In interviews with members of St Sebastian's I was often told the history of the church and asked if I didn't think that both the setting and the building itself were not beautiful. Yet however enthusiastically members described their church they always stressed that the object of their commitment was not the building but the community of believers within it.

Among both congregations there was a consensus that when they talked of their commitment to a church they were referring to the church as the embodiment of shared ritual, worship and the relationships they sustained there. The importance of commitment to the church and the object of commitment was clearly described and explained in the interviews and questionnaires. The remaining question is why should church membership and regular participation in the life of the church be so important to the core membership - what is the significance of their commitment?

The significance of commitment

Members of St Martin's Church often used the same metaphor to explain why membership of their church was so important to their faith.

I was asked to imagine a coal fire burning in the grate. The fire burns brightly giving out light and a great heat, it blazes and crackles and as new coals are added they are consumed and add to the magnificence and warmth of the fire. If a single coal falls from the grate the fire will not fade and the coal itself will not extinguish. However if the coal is not returned to the main body of the fire over time it will cool and fade and eventually become a lifeless piece of rock. A Christian living outside of the church is like the single coal alone on the hearth. It may not be the coal's fault that it is no longer part of the main body of the fire. It is not the coal's fault that it will lose its heat and eventually become something completely different from its previous existence. A Christian may leave the church for many reasons but unless he rejoins a church he will eventually become something completely different from the Christian he once was. However much he tries, the forces and pressures of the world will be a far stronger influence on him than his own faith. Just as it is inevitable that the burning coal, separated from the fire will lose its heat so it is inevitable that the individual Christian separated from the church will also lose something of himself.

The metaphor was always employed by members to explain both why membership of a church is so important to them and why they regard Christians outside of the church as a different species of Christian to themselves. Although the story of the coal was only told to me by members of St Martin's church, members of St Sebastian's used other metaphors or stories to illustrate the same points. One metaphor was the church as a football club. Some people believe themselves to be supporters of a particular football team. When asked what team they support they can tell you, but they never attend a match, they never meet with other supporters of the team. They never commit any of their time, their money or their emotions to the support or following of their team. These individuals may believe they support their team, and in a way they do, but their support is of a qualitatively different nature to the fan who attends a match every week, who discusses the game, the players and the gossip with friends and acquaintances, and who dedicates a portion of his life to the maintenance and health of the

team. Both types of supporter are fans but they have a different relationship to the team and as a consequence the team plays a different role in their lives.

Another metaphor used to explain the significance of church membership was the church as a theatre or an amateur dramatics society:

If you join a drama society you do so for a reason: you join so you can take part in a play. You may be shy at first, it may take a while for you to find a place in the company but eventually you want to take a role in the production not just spend all the time in the audience or you might as well have stayed at home. There is a place for the audience but that is not the point of being in the play. Not every one can be the leading lady but everyone who joins can play an important part and that's the point of joining in the first place, to play a part in the company.

Not everyone told me stories in answer to my question about why church membership was important to them. A common response was a large sigh followed by the rhetorical question 'What is the point of being a Christian unless you are part of a church?' or 'Yes you can be a Christian and not go to church but what kind of Christian are you?'. The stories differed from one another but they hold the key to understanding why the core membership of both congregations believe that church membership is important to them.

Types of Christianity

The burning coal analogy clearly illustrates one aspect of the core membership's understanding of their commitment: they are aware that what it means to be a Christian is not a uniform experience. Just as there are coals in the fire and coals cooling on the hearth, there are Christians in the church and Christians outside of the church. Everyone I interviewed was aware that membership of a church was merely one option among many for a Christian. They knew that their Christianity, a Christianity that was centred on their membership of a church was a specific and marginal type of Christianity. Most were also familiar with the different types of Christianity; sometimes because they had themselves in the past believed themselves to be Christians but had not gone to church, or because they knew others who called themselves Christians but who never attended a church. Most of the core membership were aware that the majority of people who called themselves Christians were likely to be Christians who only ever attended church for three types of occasion, the 'hatches, matches and dispatches' (baptisms, marriages and funerals) Christians.

One couple argued that in this country the most common type of Christianity was what they called 'folk Christianity'. People believe they are Christians, they use the symbols and buildings of the church as reference points, but only because they are familiar with them, not

because they understand them. They described their own desire to be married (before they were members of a church) as a result of folk religion:

> We thought we were doing a major life changing thing and we felt God should be involved. It was a bit responding to folk religion. I don't think either of us would say we were Christians at that time, we had a God but it was a folk religion God, something we remembered from our childhood that we hadn't thought about, but something we wanted to be there at our wedding.

Core members instinctively classified types of church membership and Christianity. They were aware that there were different types of members of the church and that those types involved a different relationship with the church. The types of Christianity listed and described by the membership in interviews were not dissimilar to the types of religiosity described by Robert Towler in his work on the nature of religious belief and behaviour. Towler, at the time a senior lecturer at Leeds University bases his own typology of religiosity on an analysis of over 4000 letters sent to Dr. Robinson after he published *Honest to God* in 1963 and on the typology of sects developed by Wilson in *The Social Dimensions of Sectarianism.* Towler believed that not only are there many types of religiosity but that it was important to know the extent of the range and the qualities of each if any one of them was to be clearly analysed and understood (Towler, 1984: 11).

The typology of religiosity developed by Towler included categories that had nothing to do with church membership, (Gnosticism and working class exemplarism) as well as forms of religiosity that included the church. Although the names of Towler's categories would be unfamiliar to the church members I interviewed they were aware that different types existed and that the category they belonged to was not only one of many but one that was in the minority.

Church members and church members

The core membership were not only aware that their type of Christianity was not universal within Christianity but that there were different types of church members. The most obvious difference among the congregation in terms of membership was the frequency of attendance. The wardens from both churches easily provided a breakdown of the congregation in relation to the frequency of attendance as well as the longevity of attendance. The breakdown from both churches was similar and once again broadly corresponded to the breakdown of memberships developed in sociological studies of church membership or religious commitment.

An example of a detailed parish study that includes a survey of commitment that is partly focused on the frequency of attendance is Michael Hornsby-Smith's *The Changing Parish.* A

sociologist at the University of Surrey, Hornsby-Smith has investigated changes in English Catholicism during the last 30 years. In *The Changing Parish*, an in-depth study of Parochial Catholicism post-Vatican II he looks at the strength and weaknesses of many of the relationships between the laity and the wider church. As part of this work Hornsby-Smith has developed a typology of parishioners, which distinguishes between parishioners in their commitment to the parish. The commitment of parishioners is broken down into four main categories:

1. Irregular attenders who consider themselves Catholics but who attend church infrequently.

2. Regular attenders.

3. Traditional believers who regularly attend on a Sunday but who play no other part in the life of the church.

4. Those who attend regularly an are involved in the running and organisation of the church.

Hornsby-Smith includes other factors apart from attendance in his assessment of membership. The characteristics identified by Hornsby-Smith as important defining elements include basic demographic information - age, gender, class - and information that describes the context of involvement with the Catholic church – for example whether half or more of an attender's friends are also Catholics or whether they were born into Catholic families or have converted to Catholicism.

In his research into participation among Catholics, Hornsby-Smith found that not only are there different types of membership but that for different groups membership of the church meant something different. In other words, the significance of church membership depended on the type of membership experienced by any one individual within the same church. Members who are intimately involved not just with the organisation of the church, but who are emotionally committed to its survival are more likely to hold different values and feel differently about the church. (Hornsby-Smith, 1989: 93)

Other investigations into the nature of church membership have discovered that there are different levels of commitment which are related to other factors. In *The Changing Parish* Hornsby-Smith notes the similarity between his typology of parishioners and the typology formulated by J. Fichter in *Social Relations in the Urban Parish*. The similarity lies both in some of the categories developed and also in several of their conclusions on the factors associated with each level of commitment.

In *Social Relations in the Urban Parish,* Fichter attempts to define the characteristics, which distinguish different types of members of a Catholic parish in Chicago. He discovered that

each unit within his typology was recognisable both by the time they spent at church and by the quality of their relationship with the parish (Fichter, J. 1960: 30). Fichter's typology of parishioners is also based on factors that indicate behaviour and attitudes as well as frequency of attendance. His typology includes:

1. Leaders - active parishioners who also take the initiative in promoting parish life;

2. Nuclear - regular church attenders who also participate in parish activities;

3. Modal - normal parishioners who constitute the mass of ordinary Catholic laymen;

4. Marginal - who conform to the minimum levels of Catholic membership;

5. Dormant - those who have been baptised but who no longer consider themselves Catholic.

(Fichter, J. 1960: 22)

Fichter's typology distinguishes between members who may spend equal amounts of time in church but who maintain a different relationship to the church because of the particular role they play. More specifically, like Hornsby-Smith, he noted that although an individual's place within a particular group is fluid, members experience their membership of the Catholic Church differently (Fichter, J. 1960: 83).

Taking other factors into consideration in the analysis of church membership allows a more nuanced approach in developing a typology of church membership. Not only does it take into account the different roles that individuals assume in the church, but it also allows us to differentiate between the value that members place upon their membership.

Different commitments

Most core members I interviewed believed that a person's motives for attending church were an important factor in the analysis of a church's membership. One core member explained that if I was trying to understand why church membership was important to her and others like her then I had to understand that 'there are church members and there are church members'. By this she meant that for some people in the congregation their membership indicated a desire or behaviour that was not motivated by (what she considered to be) Christianity. She stressed that it was impossible to gain an accurate view of the congregation simply by examining who were the people who attended the most regularly or for the longest period of time or even those who assumed the most responsibilities. One example she gave was of the couples who attended church every year, who normally stayed for less than a year but while they attended church were both regular in their attendance and quite active:

> It happens nearly every year. At a certain time of year they come, we know why they're there, they're there because they want their children to attend the local Church of England school. Personally I don't mind, they join in and sometimes they help out and sometimes they stay.

One young mother, not a core member of the congregation, explained that her once monthly attendance was motivated by her wish to bring her children up properly:

> BS If I didn't go to the family service I'd have to go on my own - my husband is a total atheist. But he knows I think it's important for them to be familiar with the church even if they choose not to when they are older.
> LR You say you go for your children, do you go for you at all?
> BS I wouldn't say that I was deeply religious. But I don't know if you've noticed this but St Martin's does have a really nice atmosphere. I like going. I see people I know there. I heard about it [the church] at my antenatal class so I do know people there. I've put Harry down for Beavers but I don't know if I'll go when they're older.

That there are church members and there are church members was confirmed in the interviews I held with members of both churches representing a cross section of the congregations. The interviews confirmed the observation made by others that church membership itself is a differentiated phenomenon not merely on a quantitative level, but qualitatively as well. Not only are there members who give varying amounts of time to their church but that the time given may represent different things to each member.

However there is also a sense in which different types of commitment represent qualitatively different religious experiences. The American sociologist N. Dearmarth argues that within the category of church membership there exist different levels and types of commitment that are defined by religious orientation (Dearmarth, N. 1963: 29). He notes that the different levels of church commitment are not only differentiated by the frequency of church attendance but also by the value and meaning that each member places upon their membership of the church. This means that different types of commitment do not just represent less or more attachment to a church but a totally different relationship to a church. Often the difference between the relationships members sustain with a church can be characterised by the value and the meaning they attach to that membership.

The value placed on church membership by individuals can be influenced by several factors. In his analysis of religious behaviour in America Proffessor Gerhard Lenski describes two basic types of religious commitment: commitment to a particular social group and commitment that transcends a particular social group. Socio-religious group commitment can be broken down into more specific elements. Associational commitment comprises involvement in church

activities and tends to be made for a particular purpose. Communal commitment occurs where an individual restricts their friends and marriage partner to members of a particular group, which they belong to because of the attraction of being with like-minded people 'for whom the social relationships established are an end in themselves' (Lenski, G. 1963:.20).

Lenski and Dearmarth differentiate church membership through combining the amount of time that is given to the church with the meaning and significance of the commitment to the members involved. The approach to the classification of church membership provided by Dearmarth, Lenski and others is the one that the core members I interviewed were most likely to adopt in their classification of the levels an types of membership within their own church.

This was apparent when members spoke about the commitment of fellow church members but also when they described the nature of their own commitment. In response to a question about whether he attended a church before he moved into the area, Clive who had attended his present church for over 20 years replied:

> No I wasn't a churchgoer. It's only in the last few years that I've been so committed myself. I've been a committed churchgoer for 20 years or so, since I've been married. But as a committed Christian it's only been two and a half to 3 years.

Clive's response was unusual in that he believed he had made the transition from mere churchgoer to committed Christian while at the same church. However his reply was typical of core members who compared the quality of their present commitment with the nature of their church attendance in the past and believed that in the past their involvement was of an inferior quality. Julie's analysis of her past membership of a church was an example of this:

> I went every week with my parents and then when I was a teenager my parents said I could make my own mind up. I went through a mad stage when I was a teenager. A friend and I used to go every single day and then we were going to be nuns and that sort of thing. When I was training (to be a nurse) I used to go out with someone who sang in the choir at the Cathedral so I used to go to evensong. Now I go every week with my children. So I've always gone but its only now that I go as me, not as someone's daughter, or girlfriend or for a laugh.

The significance of church membership to the core membership is linked to frequency of attendance but is something more than this. The core membership were characterised by factors that were quantifiable: frequent attendance at church; holding one or more positions of responsibility at church; the stated belief that the church was important to their faith. As a group, the core membership of both congregations would fit into Hornby-Smith's last category (those who attend regularly and are involved in the running and organisation of the church) and

Fichter's Leaders and Nuclear category. These factors identify the core membership within a congregation but they do not explain why membership of a church is so important to them.

The approaches provided by the work of Demerath, Lenski and Towler are one way of going beyond the measurement of attendance as a way of understanding the significance of church membership because of their emphasis on the levels and nature of inter-group activity and relationships among the congregation as a way of understanding why membership is important to them.

The metaphor of the coal fire or the drama company or the story of the two football fans as a way of explaining the significance of church membership does suggest a further reason for the importance with which the core members endowed church membership. They believed there was something about the regular attendance of the church itself that was tied to their faith. As their metaphors indicated they believed that without church membership they would lack or lose an essential element of their Christianity. In the interviews it became clear that the core membership believed that activity within the church and collective worship or participating in collective responsibilities were the most important elements of their church membership. It also became clear that the reason they held the idea of activity and collectivity in such high esteem was that they felt that without out it their faith would diminish or become something less than it was. The relationship between faith and activity within the church was considered as the defining factor in their membership of the church.

Activity and faith

Modern Christians who regularly attend church are unusual[1] in that many of them believe that membership of their church is a component part of their belief. The peculiarity of their attendance (compared to the majority of proclaimed Christians who do not) underlies the question of the nature of church-based Christianity. What is it about their beliefs or them as individuals that impels them to church on a regular basis when so many are not impelled?[2] In many ways the origins of church-based commitment remains unclear. In *The Social System* Talcott Parsons argues that religious commitment manifests itself not merely as the loyalty of the individual to religious ideals but that religious commitment necessarily contains directives for action. If this is true in relation to church-based Christianity then behaviour of some kind is an inherent and inseparable component of commitment.

Herve Carrier also identifies a link between belief and action that is an integral part of church membership (Carrier, H.1965: 299). For Carrier an essential element of commitment is a sense of belonging. Belonging itself demands some kind of identification with others who share the same beliefs. In this way belief, belonging and commitment are intrinsically intertwined. Hans Mols echoes this thesis when he emphasises 'the close relationship that exists between commitment and consistency of behaviour' (Mol, H. 1965: 216). For Mol the relationships

between beliefs and certain types of behaviour are so clear that he believes it is possible to predict an individual's actions if you have correctly analysed the nature of his commitment.

The core members of both congregations talked of the advantages of belonging and described the personal comfort and satisfaction they gained from associating with like-minded people. They valued the sense of belonging experienced by the core members, but it was not their reason for joining a congregation. In interviews members indicated that they perceived that a sense of belonging was a desirable consequence of membership of a church but they repeatedly stated that it was not the reason for their membership.

They also believed that for them active membership of a church was a necessary part of their faith. They also stressed that their membership of a church is not an inevitable outcome of belief in Christianity just as active membership of a church is not an inevitable outcome of church attendance. Most members stated that for them the most important reason for their regular attendance of a church was their participation in a community in which they were active in some way. Interviewees continually stressed that activity within a community was the most distinctive and the most important feature of their church.[3]

What most core members were sure of was that without an attempt on their part (as active lay members) to encourage activity[4] within the church and to sustain their own activity their Christian faith could not be sustained in the form that it existed at the present.

The relationship between faith and activity

Most of the core membership I interviewed believed there was a relationship between their own faith and the activities they undertook as part of their membership of the church. Not all of them were clear as to the nature of the relationship but there was a common assumption that either was incomplete without the other.

The relationship between faith and activity was manifested in several ways throughout my research, the most obvious being the different beliefs associated with different sections of the congregation. In particular, the difference between non-core members and the core members could often be identified through their distinctive beliefs.

My sample was not large enough to show an absolute link but there was a strong indication that the more active the member the more likely they were to believe that the church should be inclusive rather than exclusive. That is members were more likely to support a vision of a church that was open to everyone if they were more involved. In response to the question 'Some senior churchmen have suggested that the church should take a firmer stand on certain issues, e.g. divorce, homosexuality and unmarried mothers. What do you think?', the only people to tick the 'I agree' option were church members who either attended less than once a

week or who were involved in no activities outside of those directly related to worship. Similarly the members most likely to choose the 'The Church of England is a broad church and there is room for many different views in the one church' were those who attended at least once week and undertook more than one activity.

Other research into congregations[5] and the Church of England specifically has provided evidence that there is a substantial relationship between the activity and behaviour of individuals, on the one hand, and their beliefs on the other. The research by Davies, D. et al. on rural Anglican churches discovered that there was a relationship between beliefs about the church and the relationship people had with the church. The people most likely to consider the church an exclusive institution were those members of society least likely to attend church. Individuals who were already connected to a church in some way were more likely to consider the church an open institution and church members were more likely to think that the church was 'for everyone' (Davies, D. et al, 1991:115).

In their work on the Church of England, Kenneth Medhurst and George Moyser established that there were links between the beliefs of individuals and their relationship to the church. *In Church and Politics in A Secular Age,* they note that members who occupy a certain position within the church are more likely to hold similar, religious and political opinions despite differences in age, class and gender. They found that although class was a powerful causal factor in the probability of people's involvement and the level of their involvement in the church, (Medhurst, K. and Moyser, G. 1988: 169), once they were involved in the church, class was not a significant factor in the nature of their commitment. (Medhurst, K. and Moyser, G. 1988: 237).

The relationship between the beliefs of the core members and the non-core members and their respective levels of participation has been established in several studies. However the fact of the relationship raises further questions about the exact nature of the relationship. If belief and behaviour are connected in some way, the basis of that connection remains unclear. The relationship may be a static one or it may be one that changes and evolves. The origins of the relationship are unknown, as is the balance between the two.

An extension of the sociological discussion on the relationship between belief and church attendance is the discussion over which part of the relationship is causal: does belief initiate changes in behaviour or is it the case that behaviour causes changes in beliefs? That there is a relationship between belief and levels or types of activity is established but the question of which (if any) is the determining factor is a more complex question. The question of how and why individuals form a particular unit and behave in a certain way acquires a more intriguing aspect when these individuals appear to be acting against general trends within society. If it is also the case that participation in and commitment to every kind of voluntary organisation is

declining, then the causal factors of church commitment gain a wider significance beyond the church.[6]

Sociologists have attempted to discover the factors surrounding church commitment and many have noted that this is a complex process. The attempt to discover the causal factors behind church commitment can be an ambiguous process for several reasons.[7] One complication is that even when researchers have isolated a number of demographic factors, beliefs or patterns of behaviour associated with church commitment it is often difficult to work out which if any are causal. For example, the data collected from research may clearly show that there are a number of factors associated with the decline or increase in church attendance. The most difficult task then becomes the identification of those factors which are significant and those which are coincidental.

Despite the ambiguities in the search for a casual factor in the question of church commitment, there are several key theories in relation to this problem.[8] However not only is some of the research in this area inconclusive but there is very little consensus[9] over the possibility of determining if there is an identifiable causal factor.

A second problem is that there is also the possibility that church commitment itself is a causal factor.[10] If this is the case then it would mean that an individual's commitment to a church influences other decisions and behaviour rather than the other way around.

The possibility that church commitment itself is a causal factor is one that Lenski acknowledges throughout his research in the *Religious Factor.* In the section where he examines the links between economic success and associational involvement among the major religious groups he highlights the difficulties in isolating a causal factor. He notes that although his figures suggest that church attendance may be conducive to upward mobility, he adds:

> we cannot ignore the possibility that active involvement in churches may be a consequence rather than a cause of vertical mobility. The high level of involvement among the upwardly mobile may simply represent conformity, or even over conformity to middle class norms. (Lenski, G. 1963: 116)

Some sociologists have concluded that the search for a causal factor in relation to religious or more specifically church commitment is not tenable. The problem is not only that it is difficult to isolate a single factor but also that it is possible that the processes which impel individuals towards religious commitment are not only varied but dynamic and interchange with one another.

Lenski rejects an economically deterministic interpretation of church commitment. He also rejects the idea of religious determination for similar reasons. Although there were clearly relationships between the two phenomena, he believed that to impose a deterministic framework on a particular variable was to ignore the fluidity of both. The key to interpreting the many factors associated with church commitment is not the primacy of one variable over the other but the relationships between them.

The research conducted by Hoge and Carrol suggests that isolating a single causal factor in religious commitment is inherently problematic. Their work suggests that there is a relationship between religious and church commitment and non-religious factors. In their survey of the factors influencing church commitment and participation in American suburban Protestant churches, Hoge and Carrol discuss five major theories relating to this issue: deprivation, child-rearing, status group, localism, and doctrinal beliefs. Of those five theories, only one, doctrinal beliefs, does not establish a link between commitment and factors that are external to religion.

Hoge and Carrol argue that there is a definite relationship between beliefs and the level of commitment. Those with the firmest and most orthodox beliefs were also those who tended to participate more in all aspects of church life as well as contribute a greater percentage of their income to the church. This confirms the findings of other major studies in this area[11] but left unanswered the question of causality.

To test causality Hoge and Carrol developed a hypothesis using two models. In Model A demographic factors, type of background and family, cause beliefs which in turn cause participation. In Model B social variables, background, etc., cause participation, which in turn cause beliefs. After testing both models they found that Model A was stronger 'and probably causation is more from beliefs to participation than vice versa' (Hoge, D. and Carroll, J. 1978: 120). However they still concluded that:

> the direction of causality is not decisively shown. As noted above it could be that intense church participation causes formation of certain attitudes and motivations as much as vice versa. (Hoge, D. and Carrol, J. 1978: 120)

Like Lenski, the approach taken by Hoge and Carrol is one that avoids positing a strictly linear approach to cause and effect. Both take into account the wider factors at work and evade the narrow deterministic equation that insists that beliefs either cause participation or the reverse. Hoge and Carrol's work suggests that the relationship between the different factors is one that is dynamic and fluid. At each stage of the process, from the initial influence of demographic and familial factors in forming beliefs to the translation of those beliefs into behaviour, the possibility exists for the chain of influence to breakdown.

While it is clear that individuals who most regularly participate and who place the highest value on their participation in a church consistently exhibit the firmest beliefs, it is not the case that it is inevitable that all those who share the same background will form the same beliefs.[12] It is also not the case that all those with some or even strong religious beliefs are committed to a church,[13] a factor which appears to reinforce the arbitrary nature of the relationship between belief and behaviour.

The members I spoke to were not interested in identifying a causal relationship between their beliefs and their lives as active members of a church. For most of the core members the most important aspect of the relationship between belief and behaviour was that they believed they were mutually dependent on each other. Belief enriched church activity, gave it purpose and direction, while the activity of church membership was the concrete realisation of that belief. On their own, belief became something altogether less substantial and more transient, while activity became a series of hollow endeavours without purpose or authenticity.

The transformative power of activity

A view that was expressed by most of the non-core members whom I interviewed was that people who used or attended the church who were not also committed believers should be discouraged from doing so. On a visit to St Sebastian's I sat next to a middle-aged woman and her daughter whom I had not seen before. After the service I introduced my self and they told me that they were visiting from Rochester. They were not members of a church but the daughter wanted to be married in a church. They had asked the vicar at their local church in Rochester to marry the daughter but he had refused on the grounds that they never came to church. Her mother had infrequently attended St Cosmos and Damien as a child and they planned to talk to the vicar to ask his permission to use the church that day.

In later interviews I asked members what they thought about this request. Non-core members thought it was 'a liberty' an 'example of the way people take advantage of our church' and that the woman and her daughter 'were hypocrites'. Alternatively core members believed that as long as the wedding could be fitted into the church timetable then it should be performed at their church. Several reasons were offered for this accommodation but the most common was that baptisms, marriages and funerals provided opportunities for the church to meet new people but also for non-church members to participate in the church. Core members believed that participation in almost any act of joint worship could be the chrysalis, which evolved into a firm faith and a life inside the church.

These momentary instances of contact between the church and non-members were valued because they were temporary windows of opportunity where belief could be introduced and nurtured through the activity. The general perception was that activity, the participation in a

particular rite or activity that was related to the church, contained the potential within it to foster and promulgate belief.

The transformative potential of activity was a recurring theme in the discussions of the importance of church membership with the core membership. The activity associated with membership was considered to be an essential lubricant in the process of attracting people into the church and then of acting as a focus for new members. Several members of St Martin's church explained how they often take a proactive position in relation to encouraging participation precisely because they believed that it was so crucial to the life of the church. Andrew's responsibilities in the church involved him in decision-making and in the distribution of other positions of responsibility. He described how he would meet up with other active church members, including the vicar, to discuss what jobs needed filling and possible 'volunteers' in the congregation. The discussion in these meetings often concentrated on how to involve particular individuals rather than on who was available or suited to a job. Andrew explained that for any healthy, vibrant church increasing the number of people who actively participated in the church was more important than filling certain jobs, regardless of the importance of those jobs to the running of the church. The emphasis on participation meant that the vicar and the core members tried never to leave the possibility of involvement to chance. New members of the congregation and those who looked as they might be willing were approached and asked:

> ...that's how people get involved, by people asking. So you make opportunities for people on the fringes and trying to get in. So you say "would you like to clear up after the family services?". And if they say "great" and are in there pitching in, they get involved and if they say "thank you, no", that's fine. And if they get involved you know there's a fair chance they might take it further.

Other members recognised that involvement and participation were essential if individuals were to maintain the level of their emotional and physical commitment to the church. One woman described how her own children had been members of the church Sunday school and had willingly accompanied her to church every week. As teenagers her children professed a strong faith in Christianity, yet she anticipated that 'pretty soon they will stop coming with me, the writing's more or less on the wall'.

Her prophecy was based on the observation that unless church members were involved in the church in some way, they lacked the emotional and intellectual investment in the church that could sustain their membership. She noted that on the rare occasions that young people made the transition from adolescence to adulthood within the church, they were always people who held some kind of responsibility within the church. People who were not involved in the running of the church maintained a less stable and weaker bond with it and were therefore more likely to break that bond or merely drift away. She used her own experience as an

example of the bond created between the individual and the church through participation. When her second child started secondary education she felt she had more time and energy to devote to her career. As she committed more of herself to her job she found that her job became more demanding but also that her job became more rewarding. At this point in her life, although she had been a regular member of a church for 13 years, she felt she could have drifted away from the church. She described how the ties, forged by her membership of various groups, and the seriousness with which she endowed her responsibilities meant that 'drifting away' was an impossibility:

> I could have become a once-a-month member. There are quite a few once-a-month members at St Martin's, but it wouldn't have worked for me. My husband thought it was guilt that stopped me from scaling down my involvement, but why should I be guilty? For over a decade I've given this church a lot of energy when I was raising a young family.
>
> It was more that I do so much, and I've done it for long and it's been so much to me that to stop doing it, even a part of it, would have meant a big change in my life. And once I began to think about the change it would mean I realised that I didn't want that kind of change.

Participation as the root of belief

Core members repeatedly stressed that not only did belief and participation reinforce each other but that the relationship between the two was more fundamental. The possibility of discussing their faith with fellow church members and joining acts of collective worship was frequently cited as an important part of church life but they also believed that it was their commitment to the church that enabled their beliefs to survive and grow. Susan was typical in that not only was she certain that her faith was strong and confident, but she also believed that outside of a church she would find it difficult to sustain her present intensity of belief. Her participation in the church, in worship, in the running of various discussion groups and then in socialising with other church members not only reinforced her beliefs, it made them possible:

> Well I go off on tangents. I get ideas and unless you're communicating with other people you lack their input and it's unbalanced. The physical act of worshipping I find very powerful. It gives me physical and emotional strength. I feel grounded by worship. When I have that it makes everything easier. Going to church regularly is important and I miss it terribly if I can't go. The bit of the service where we say, "though we are many, we are one body" is so powerful - being part of a larger corporate body. I'm now a Christian; I can say it absolutely and completely. My faith is really firm, I can't imagine losing it. But the practice of faith, I know that's what keeps it. It would be really, really hard without it.

Other core members echoed Susan's interpretation of the significance of church commitment. One couple explained how they always knew that their membership of the church would be the 'expression of our faith'. They asked their vicar how often they should attend church before they were confirmed. Their vicar suggested that 'about once a month should it'. The couple decided to attend every week (and to become involved in the running of the church), because otherwise 'we might as well have stayed at home and not bothered'. For them the weekly activities at the church, the collective worship, the camaraderie, the assumption of often arduous responsibilities and discussion were not merely the rituals and duties that reinforced their faith; taken together they were the embodiment of their faith.

I asked core members if they thought there was any difference between them and Christians who professed their Christianity but who never went to church and believed that you didn't have to go to church to be Christian. The replies were normally prefaced with the warning that I shouldn't think that they (regular church members) thought they were any better than non-church attending Christians, or that the non-church going were poorer Christians than they were. Nonetheless in every interview where this issue was discussed core members explained that the Christianity of non-church Christians was fundamentally different from their own. They used words like 'shallow'; 'individualistic' and 'undisciplined' to described non-church Christianity. Alison explained:

> It gives me a sense of identity, a lot of feedback. The church is the body of Christ. I was running a confirmation class on Monday and in the confirmation handbook written by Hugh Montefiore it says 'belonging is as important as believing'. And I would agree with that. You can only experience everything if you are in a church community and belong to that church community. There are a lot of people who say I'm a Christian but I don't go to church. But you lose a dimension - its like watching a black-and-white telly. Because you actually share things and experiences with that group.

The loss of something essential, a missing dimension to what it means to be a Christian was often cited as one of the major differences between the Christianity of church members and the Christianity of non-church members. Some people went so far as to deny that non-church Christianity was Christianity at all, but most saw it as a rather limited Christianity.

Non-church Christianity was characterised as existing between firm and rather narrow boundaries. This type of faith could be satisfactory and fulfilling to the people involved but it could never go beyond the limits inherent within it. Alternatively the Christianity of church members was portrayed as something without limits, something that was more generous, stronger and ultimately better.

I asked many core members to explain to me why commitment to a church should make such a difference to the quality of their faith. They invariably replied that the biggest difference was the act of sharing faith in some way. Some interviewees argued that the Christianity of individuals outside of the church was limited to the experiences of the individual. Not only was it prone to all the temptations of the non-Christian world, but it was entirely governed and shaped by the whim of the individual.

One core member called this type of Christianity a 'selfish' and 'inward-looking' type of Christianity. It was the type of Christianity suited to people 'who couldn't be bothered to give any more than they had to' and who probably thought that watching '*Songs of Praise* was a major commitment'. Other core members stressed the advantages of church-based Christianity, that is while the faith of the Christian outside the church was experienced individually, their faith was experienced communally. One couple came to this conclusion as they tried to describe the importance of their commitment to the church to me:

> Beryl: For us it's very important, but I don't know for any one else.
> LR: Can you be a Christian, feel strongly and not go to church?
> Beryl: Yes, as long as they feel they are a Christian that's what's important to them.
> Walter: Yes you can be a Christian and a non-worshipper. You get people who say "Oh yes I always pray if I'm in trouble at work", and they think that's all they need.
> Beryl: But we need much more than that. I need a recharge.
> Walter: Yes at every Eucharist. The church is not the building, it's the members at that building. We go to worship with the fellow members of the church at that Parish - it's a chance to recharge our batteries.
> LR: So the church is an important part of your faith?
> Beryl: Yes
> Walter: Yes, but what about Terry Waite? He couldn't go to church. Say there was no church, or we couldn't go to church, we were imprisoned...
> Beryl: Or infirmed.
> Walter: That's where your faith is going to tell, that's when you need the strength.
> Beryl: So you're saying it's a luxury to go to church?
> Walter: It's a blessing.
> Beryl: Yes, it's a privilege to be able to worship with other members.
> Walter: Personally I don't think I'd be any worse a person if I didn't go to church, but I don't think I'd have the kind of faith I have now.

The communal nature of their faith was explicitly articulated by some core members and assumed by others. The significance of commitment, 'going to church', 'worshipping together' and 'doing my bit to keep it going' was that these acts were perceived as existing at the heart of their Christianity.

Conclusion

The significance of commitment across both congregations depended on the degree of involvement. The non-core members were less likely to value their commitment to the church as an important part of their faith. The core members unanimously valued their commitment and in the interviews explained in a variety of ways why the believed their commitment to a church was so important to them. As other observers have noted, within congregations the greater the commitment to the church the more likely there is to be institutional involvement on the part of the individual (Abrams, M. 1985: 23-58). Yet it appears as though the significance of commitment to the core membership can be discussed in terms not only of what they do but of what they believe.

The attempt to analyse the significance of church membership as a form of religious behaviour has been criticised in the past as a rather narrow and one-dimensional focus,[14]while others have argued that church membership as an index of religiosity is inherently problematic in a period of declining church attendance.[15] Yet in the case of the core members from both congregations, their church membership is not merely the measure of their religiosity, it provides the context for their lives as Christians.

The significance of commitment for the core membership is such that from their perspective it is nonsensical to ask the question of causality: does belief cause commitment or does commitment cause belief? For the core members the importance of commitment was that it made their beliefs a reality. It was not simply that commitment to a church sustained their beliefs, strengthened them or underlined them, although it did all of these things. Most importantly, their commitment to a church was at the core of their beliefs. They believed that Christianity was essentially communal in nature, and that their beliefs demanded expression through the membership of a church.

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[1] Most people who identify themselves as Christians do not attend church apart from baptisms, marriages and funerals. The latest statistics show that 10 per cent of men and 15 per cent of women attend church once a week or more (Social Trends, 1999, *The Stationary Office*, London, 220).

[2] This question cannot be answered with the use of demographic factors alone. *In Church and Religion in Rural England* Davies, D. et al note that that, after collating the data from their own research, it is possible to provide a sketch of an individual most likely to attend church as well a sketch of an individual least likely to attend a church (Davies, D. et al, 1991: 245). Yet these facts do not in themselves explain why these two hypothetical individuals are more or less likely to go to church.

[3] The importance of the idea of community for core members is explored in greater detail in the chapter 'A Belief in Belonging'.

[4]In using the term activity I am not referring to rituals commonly associated with regular worship at an Anglican church. The term activity explicitly refers to those functions that relate to the administrative running or social life of the church that a worshipping member of a church might not necessarily be involved in.

[5] In the work of Hornsby-Smith, Lenski, etc, the categories of religious and church involvement also include a categorisation of beliefs in which certain beliefs are related to levels and types of involvement. This relationship is also noted by Conor Ward in his work on a Catholic parish in Liverpool, *Priests and People.* Ward found that those members of the parish who were most actively involved in the church were more likely to think of the parish in ideal terms than those whose relationship to the church was infrequent. (Ward, C. 1965: 73)

[6] From data collected in Britain over the last decade there is a clear trend towards the decline of participation in all types of voluntary organisations. The 1992 Survey of Public Attitudes notes that generally all participation is falling. For example in 1978 53% of the workforce was in a trade union but in 1992 that figure was 38%. Similarly the membership of the Mothers Union and the National Union of Townswomen's Guilds have halved between 1971 and 1992. British levels of church participation were the lowest of all the countries included in the Christian Research Association comparison in 1990:

Country	Percentage of population involved in a church
Netherlands	55%
Austria	40%
France	23%
Irish Republic	81%
Great Britain	15%

[7] In his work on the factors influencing religious commitment Hoge has isolated several factors that must be considered in the attempt to determine causality. In his work with De Zulueta, he argues that a problem in trying to assess whether religious commitment is a causal factor is that religious activity itself has potential consequences that are 'multiple and limitless' (Hoge, D. and De Zulueta, E. 1985: 23).

[8] The many theories can be roughly grouped into two categories. The first are those theories which emphasise that the origin of religious commitment is generally to be found in the relationship between the individual and a wider social context, that is where an individual's environment is incapable of fulfilling all of his or her needs then the possibility for religious participation and commitment becomes a meaningful alternative. The theories developed by Stark, Bainbridge and Glock in *Towards A Theory of Religion: Religious Commitment* emphasise the place of religious commitment in the individual's attempt but ultimate failure to seek meaning and fulfillment in the secular world.

9 See footnote above.

[10] Robin Gill argues this position. He believes that the higher than average involvement in charity work by church members is a consequence of their membership of the church. (Gill, R. 1999)

[11] The relationship between belief and levels of commitment has been firmly established in studies of American church members (Fichter, J. 1960 and Lenski, G. 1963) and in studies of British Catholics (Ward, C. 1965) and Hornsby-Smith)

[12] Carrier rejects what he calls 'simplistic motivation' in his analysis of why some people are motivated religiously and others from a similar background are not. He argues that although religious conversion appears to be a 'strictly individual act', in reality there are a myriad of other factors that need to be taken into account. (Carrier, H. in *Readings in the Sociology of Religion*)

[13] A central part of Grace Davies thesis in *Religion in Britain* is that there is a general trend throughout modern society for people to believe independently of any institutional commitment (Davies, G. 1994).

[14] Gill argues that there is a tendency within the sociology of religion to assume that church membership signifies very little. (Gill, R. 1999: 31)

[15] Sissons believes that church membership as a form of religiosity must be examined alongside other criteria if it is to be a reliable source of information (Sissons, P. 1971: 62).

Chapter 5

The Communication of Commitment

> '...teenagers - but then where does one get them?'
> (Davies, D. et al. 1991: 217)

The question of commitment is at the heart of the modern church. Many of the traditional avenues used by the church to meet and attract people to Christianity, like baptisms, marriages and funerals are closing down as these practices either fall from favour or people find alternatives. The numbers of baptisms and marriages which take place in a church are falling,[1] and even where people are choosing to marry or celebrate the birth of a child with rites and celebration they are increasingly more likely not to use a church.[2] Whether the church can communicate commitment to the unchurched and the children and families of its present membership is an issue that will shape and influence the future character and even the survival of the Church of England.

My investigation into the communication of commitment in the two congregations focused on two areas. The first was the way in which the communication of commitment actually manifested itself in the lives of members. I was interested in discovering how commitment was communicated to them and also the way in which they communicated commitment to others. My second focus was members' perception of the communication of commitment, I was particularly interested in their understanding of their personal journey towards commitment and their attitudes towards their children's potential membership.

This chapter begins with a discussion of children's views of the communication of commitment and ends with an over view of members' responses to the Decade of Evangelism. Although these two areas represent extremes in the discussion of the communication of commitment in the Church of England, they reveal an unease with which the subject that was present in almost all the discussions. Generally the experience of communicating commitment to the next generation or to people outside the church was negative or one they dismissed.

The young on decline and commitment

The most noticeable difference between the congregations of St Martin's and St Sebastian's was the number of young people who attended St Martin's. Both churches ran regular Sunday Schools but at St Martin's there was also a well-attended youth group and many teenagers regularly attended full services. During the time I visited St Sebastian's only one teenager attended services, and he attended with his parents. In contrast the teenagers at St Martin's

were not noticeably accompanying their parents. They often entered and left the church independently.

The presence of so many young people in the church was significant not merely because there was only one at St Sebastian's but because their presence seemed to contradict the national trend.[3] One aspect of commitment is the question of whether or not that commitment is to be communicated to the next generation or to those completely outside the church, and if it is, how it will be communicated. Is the commitment of existing church members successfully passed on to their children; do parents expect or want to communicate their commitment to their children or to people outside the church?

The team ministry of Whitstable employed a youth minister to help nurture the young members of the churches and to organise events and meetings that were specifically designed for their needs. One such event was a monthly youth group in a local church hall. The hall was divided into sections with the younger children occupying the main body of the hall, playing games, running around and shouting and laughing. This part of the hall resembled a junior or lower secondary playground. The lights were bright and the atmosphere was lively but relaxed and informal.

Smaller, interconnecting rooms surrounded the main hall. The young people in these rooms were of more interest to me because they were older (from 13 to 17), and I felt that interviews with individuals in this age group would be more productive.[4]

These rooms were quieter and there was less movement. Most people sat on the floor in small groups. There was talking and group conversations, but it was also obvious that some of these conversations were intense and that interruption would have been impolite, insensitive and unwelcome.

When I arrived I had introduced myself to a teenager whom I recognised from St Martin's. She told me that the youth organiser whom I had been hoping to talk to was very busy that evening as one or two of the other members (both teenagers) were very upset and 'needed to talk to her'. She pointed out the youth organiser to me as we walked past. The young woman was seated on the floor next to a teenage boy. They were both leaning against the wall and talking intensely, he was clearly upset and she appeared to be consoling him.

The atmosphere in these two connecting rooms was not depressed, but it was serious and the teenagers there seemed to respect the desire for some of their number to sit quietly. It was not the atmosphere I was expecting from a youth group but several members assured me that this was normal and that only the hall with the younger children was oriented towards games and fun. Their rooms were where they could come to meet up with friends from the church,

discuss problems or issues (sometimes personal, sometimes related to Christianity) with the youth organiser.

I visited the youth group several times and interviewed 17 teenagers in groups of three or four. All the teenagers were articulate and confident and they all attended grammar or private schools.[5] Over half of them were from St Martin's. The aim of my visits was to discover how teenagers understood their future in the church and also to see if their perception of the character of commitment was in any way different from the picture presented by the adult members of the congregation.

After I was introduced to several members of the group we sat on the floor together and I described in more detail why I was there. The groups were self-selected and appeared to be based on friendship groups. They were relaxed and friendly, and occasionally other people would approach us and ask if they could watch or join in. When this happened I asked the members of the group if they minded. I sometimes asked people if they would mind waiting to join in because the group was too large. On two occasions teenagers listened to the discussion and then declined to participate, although they continued to listen. Like the majority of their parents they participated enthusiastically and were easily encouraged to talk and share their views.

My first question was whether they expected to remain church members as they moved into adulthood. Of the 17 teenagers I spoke to only one expected to be a church member throughout his life. All the others were quite certain that as they grew older they would stop attending church 'except for special occasions'. They identified different moments in their lives when they thought they would stop attending church. The most likely time to stop attending church was identified as when they went to university. Leaving home, the pressure of work and new friends were all cited as factors that would make church membership difficult.

Some of them thought that they would stop 'pretty soon', which usually meant at some time in the period leading up to their A-levels. When I asked them why A-levels was a likely time they pointed out that A-levels were very stressful, and that they knew that many people left the church or became infrequent attendees at this time.

Just as most of the teenagers were certain that they would leave the church they were equally certain that they would remain Christians, that they would retain some element of their faith and some relationship with the church. All of them said that they would get married in a church and that they would have their own children baptised. I asked them if they would like to see their own children as active church members as they were themselves. All of them, even the one teenager who thought that he would remain a church member all his life, said

that they unsure. Eleven of them said that it would depend on the child's wishes and that they would not be disappointed or upset if the child decided to leave the church. The others pointed out that, regardless of their wishes, they thought the chances of their own children becoming church members was slim and that they did not believe it was right 'to force religion on people'.

One of the biggest areas of difference between the teenagers was over the likelihood of them ever returning to the church as regular members. Nine of them thought that it was unlikely that as adults they would attend a church as regularly as they were doing at the moment. When I asked them why, it became clear that they were well aware that church membership was declining not just in their church but across the whole church. They could see no reason why they should be exempt from this process and expected that they would only come to church for a special reason.

Apart from marriages, baptisms and funerals, special reasons cited for coming to church included: 'when you come home to visit and you go to church with your mum and dad'; 'you might go if you were feeling depressed or something terrible happened'; or even if 'you felt ready when you began families of your own'. They identified attending church as a family activity, one which they did themselves as a part of their existing families and one which they wanted to duplicate with their families. The three teenagers in question felt that church attendance was particularly important for children because they believed it helped develop an important sense of right and wrong. They perceived the role of the church in educating children especially important because of the lack of morality in society and the lack of any guidance at school.[6]

Of the remaining three, two believed they would become regular members of a church when they were 'much, much older'. When I asked them why they thought it would take them so long to return to the church they pointed out that most churches were full of old people, and that going to church was something 'that a lot of old people like to do when they've retired'.

I had several other opportunities to speak to teenagers individually and in small groups, and in most cases the views expressed by the members of the youth group were echoed and reinforced in these meetings.

It was Jane's eighteenth birthday celebration and she asked me if I wanted to come to her house before the celebrations began so I could talk to other teenagers. These interviews were of a different character from the interviews at the youth club. This was partly because the atmosphere was light-hearted and the interviews were more unstructured. They were also unusual in that after about 40 minutes it was obvious that they were very keen to communicate certain facts to me. They wanted me to know that they were not 'typical

Christians', that they believed in God and they regularly attended St Martin's, but they were also 'normal' and did 'normal things'.

Teenagers I spoke to were certain that their church was declining in membership. They could list the people who had left the church in their memory and they speculated who might leave in the future. When I asked them what sort of people they thought were most likely to stop attending church they all said that they thought members of their own age group were, in their experience the most likely to stop attending church.[7] I was struck by the manner and tone with which they spoke about declining numbers generally and specifically within their own church. They were nonchalant and appeared unconcerned about the element of decline in the church. They were also certain that although there were other churches in which young people worshipped, young people were in a minority and that although some of them would leave and return to the church the majority of them would not return.

One reason for their apparent unconcern about decline was their understanding of the nature of church membership. The teenagers appeared to view their commitment to the church as a particular and finite phase in their lives. They differentiated between periods of their lives when they were Christians, and other periods when they thought they might become church members. Church membership was a state that you could enter or leave depending on the circumstances. Overall their perception of decline was that it was not an important issue because there was no inevitable relationship between Christians and Christians who went to church.

In over 50 per cent of the interviews members told me that they thought it was probably a very healthy trend. Toby, a friend at Janes's party explained why he thought that the decline in membership was not a problem:

> Why should it be a problem, it's the people who stay who are important. If people leave it's because they don't really want to be there. My mum's said to me that if I didn't want to go to church there's no point in making me because all I would be doing is sitting there with a long face waiting for the end of the service.

There was some overlap between my findings and other research on the relationship between children and the church. Davies, D. et al found that the group least likely to attend special services was young adults but they were more likely to attend rites of passage (Davies, D. 1991: 217). Other research confirms that young people are more likely to leave the church in their late 'teens and that young adults are the age group least likely to attend church (*Youth A Part*: 1996: 13).

The young people I interviewed did not think their absence from church after a certain age was problematic for the church. For them it was an entirely natural process that was almost inevitable at a certain time in their lives. Of all the young people I interviewed not one mentioned the atmosphere or the nature of the services as a reason for leaving the church. When I asked them what they thought about family services the majority said they enjoyed them or that they thought they were a good idea for younger children, but there was no indication that they especially enjoyed them.

In contrast the church itself has tended to isolate the 'dull' or 'irrelevant' nature of services as a key reason for young people failing to maintain a relationship with the church (Davies, D. et al. 1991: 218). The Church of England working group on the relationship between young people and the church, *Youth A Part,* follows this trend. It pinpoints the gap between 'youth cultures and church cultures' as a primary reason for the absence of young people from church and spoke of the need to experiment with new forms of worship that could help to bridge this gap (*Youth A Part,* 1996: 38).

The gap between the perception of the church and the views expressed by teenagers themselves about their potential absence form church raises an interesting question about the way the communication of commitment is understood. The church itself identifies the absence of young people from the church as a problem. The church has located the source of this problem in the nature of church worship, it believes that more modern and contemporary forms of worship would help to keep the young in church (*Youth A Part,* 1996: 70). By contrast the young people I interviewed did not perceive their future absence from church as problematic for them as Christian individuals or for the church as a whole. This potential next generation of church members was seemingly unconcerned about the next generation of church members. In their ambiguous attitude towards the question of recruitment to the church and the fact of declining membership they shared more in common with their parents than with the authors of *Youth A Part.*

Perceptions of decline

Core members were often confused about the decline of membership within the church and that confusion appeared to be echoed in their feelings towards decline. However one theme persistently repeated itself throughout the interviews. The decline of membership may or may not be an issue with which the church ought to be concerned, but for them as individual members of a congregation it was not a major issue.

In the congregation of St Sebastian's I interviewed several women who could remember the church as it was before the Second World War. I interviewed these three elderly women (they refused to tell me their ages) as a group. They were keen for me to understand how shallow

and meaningless church membership was when it enforced, as it was when they were young. They all agreed that declining membership was probably a healthy trend because it meant that church membership was entirely voluntary:

LR: What could be positive about a falling membership?
P: I used to be taken to church as a child and be very bored. It was rather a social thing then. Very much a middle and upper class thing. In the big houses all the servants were expected to go whether they wanted to or not. That doesn't happen today.
LR: What do you mean 'it was a social thing'?
P: It was done to go. Those days I remember, a Church of England household wouldn't think of inviting a Roman Catholic into their house and vice versa.
LR: Is it still a social thing?
P: Up to a point [she raises her eyebrows]. But today people go because they want to go. You don't have to dress up to go to church any more, you don't have to do any thing you don't want to, only if you really want to.

Throughout the interviews with members (of all ages) from both churches I found the same approach to the decline of church membership repeated and echoed. Some members explained that there was no reason to worry about it because church membership had always been a 'generational issue'. She argued that people only went to church at certain times in their lives and that it was perfectly normal for the young not to go because of social or family commitments. Someone else explained that the Church of England only appeared to be declining. The majority of older people in the church meant that the church would lose more members through death than other organisations and that it was this higher than average rate of death in the church that gave the illusion of decline.

In the interviews I often discussed these theories with the interviewees. However the conclusion to the discussion was always the same: decline in numbers, for whatever reason, was not a serious problem. The failure of their church or the church in general to communicate commitment to the next generation or to maintain levels of commitment among its existing membership was not an issue that they thought was a priority for them as members.

Parents and children

The unwillingness to consider the issue of retaining membership or creating new members was reflected in the dominant attitudes of the core members towards the relationship between their children and the church. The perception of the membership of their children's relationship to the church was examined in the questionnaire and in the interviews.

The aim of the questions in section B *You and Your Family* was to find out what church members thought of their children's experience of Christianity. More specifically I wanted to know if they thought their children would also become active church members.

Most of the church members who completed the questionnaire had children, but fewer than a third (29%) had children who were still living with them. Of those parents who still had children living with them many of the answers were contradictory. I asked if they thought their children's religious education should be multi-faith or predominately Christian. I was interested in whether parents approved of their children learning about non-Christian faiths on the one hand and on the other whether they approved of school's teaching their children their own faith. Fewer than a fifth of the membership said they wanted their child's education to give equal time to all religions. Eleven per cent said they wanted Religious Education to be wholly Christian and nearly three-quarters said they preferred their children's education to be mostly Christian.

Members with children still at home indicated a strong desire for school to transmit knowledge about Christianity to their children. Nearly 80% said they wanted all or most of their children's education to be Christian, a figure that suggests that parents approved of attempts to increase their children's understanding of Christianity. Yet despite the approval implicit in the response to this question, nearly three-quarters (72%) said they had no opinion or they ticked the 'other' option when asked if they would like their children to have greater contact with a church.

There is an apparent inconsistency in the responses to the two questions. Parents desired their children to be educated about their religion, but then they also declined to tick the option that said that they would like children to 'participate fully in the life of the church'.

Another apparent inconsistency was the attitude of parents to the question of the role they should play in encouraging their children's beliefs. Eighty per cent said they encouraged their children to attend church even though in the previous question, 'Would you like your children to have more contact with a church either now or in the future?', the majority ticked the option 'I have no opinion on this question'. This ambiguity is reflected in the uneven ability of church members with children still living at home, to bring their children to church. While only 11% had children who had no contact with a church, for over a third whose children did have some contact, that contact was either infrequent or 'once or twice a month'.

From the data produced by the questionnaires it seems that the children of church members are either refusing to attend church against their parents' wishes or not attending with their parents' consent. But a more complex picture of the attitude of parents towards their children and the church evolved from the interviews. In the interviews with members with children I

asked them if their children went to church. Georgina's story of watching three children gradually drift away was typical of many parents. Also typical was her belief that she should not 'put pressure' on her children to remain church members:

> They find the service so boring I'm afraid. And it must be difficult to find a service that is structured to suit the whole age range. Mostly she'll be jolly good and she will come to church with us. She's not confirmed because she's not sure. And until she's sure I don't think it's right for us to push. It's very difficult for us to say "you must".

Many parents of children of all ages spoke with horror of 'putting pressure' on their children. In several interviews I was told stories of childhood resistance to 'pressure' and how they had reacted to the church negatively because of this 'pressure'. In some instances pressure from boarding school was blamed for alienating young people from church. One man described how 'public school tends to ram religiousness down people's throats', and one woman blamed her husband's determination 'never to listen to another sermon for as long as he has legs to walk out the church' on his years spent at a school where children were forced to attend church every day.

Coupled with the commitment not to force their children to church, lest it turn them against church was the dilemma of the value of church attendance if it were forced. A couple with three children explained that they found trying to force their children personally distressing because it challenged everything they believed about Christianity and church membership:

> The two youngest are still churchgoers but not the eldest - he thinks it's a load of old rubbish. He was confirmed. I think that when he's desperate he prays. I'm hopeful that when he has children of his own he will come back to the church....The trouble is you want the best for your children but you can't make someone have faith. We always hope that they [the children] will see what a difference it has made to our lives and realise how much it can give you. But that's part of the problem, you can't explain that to someone. You have to find out for yourself.

Some parents also explained that church attendance for children and young adults was not an easy option, and that they could understand why people in these age groups did not normally attend church. Paul and Mary have two children in their early thirties. When I asked them about their children and the church they were adamant that their children's lifestyle made church attendance impossible:

LR: Are they church attenders?
Paul: No. They are Christians but they haven't got the time.

Mary: They are two examples of what I was saying earlier even though I wasn't thinking of them. They are working so hard, they had to work so hard to get a house and they're having to work so hard to keep the house going and this is the problem for a lot of young couples.
Paul: They say themselves that they would go more often if they could. One of the reasons they enjoy staying with us is that they can relax here. They normally come to church with us when they stay.

Among the core membership there was a general consensus that it was harder to be a member of a church today than it was in the past. Even those members whose adult or teenage children regularly attended a church felt that the commitment of their children was greater than their own. They explained that when they were young none of the pressures that their children experienced existed and that therefore church membership had been an easier option for them.

It was when I was talking to parents about their children that I realised how subtle the interview process could actually be, and that what appeared to be merely an exchange of information was actually a 'deceptive simplicity' (Kvale, S. 1996:12). From the body language and manner in which interviewees spoke it seemed as though many members were uncomfortable talking about their children's relationship to the church. Of the parents I interviewed none expressed any anger over their children's non-attendance at church. However some parents whom I was interviewing together would start looking to each other frequently for confirmation, where previously they had spoken quite confidently and independently. Parents would often speak hesitantly or stop mid-sentence and ask me if I hadn't found this in other cases.

This may have been because they were unwilling to reveal these feelings in interviews with a stranger. Interviewees are often uncomfortable when talking about issues they feel might be interpreted unsympathetically by the listener (McCracken, G. 1988: 38). Most of the parents I spoke to also insisted that although they were disappointed about their children not attending church they were not particularly upset or worried about it. Because of the nature of the congregations, I know that in a number of cases this was not true. Where I knew or suspected that interviewees were not telling the truth about their feelings regarding their children's relationship to the church I adopted a non-directive approach[8] in the interviews in order to allow them to feel more comfortable and also to encourage them to continue talking honestly to me. While some members did continue to talk, others were clearly uncomfortable with the topic and changed the subject.

Core members often spoke about the feelings and behaviour of other members in the interviews. When we were talking about children, the information in one interview would often contradict the information from another interview. Paul and Mary (quoted above)

insisted that they were neither angry nor upset about their children's failure to maintain a relationship with a church. In two separate interviews with people from the same congregation I was not only told not how upset they were, but also that they were 'devastated' when their oldest child refused to have his child Christened.

Despite the fact that some core members were obviously misrepresenting their feelings about their children the fact that they continually excused their children from commitment to a church raised several points about their understanding of how commitment was communicated between families. Most core members did not see the communication of commitment between families as a natural or inevitable process.

Although they attached great importance to their own commitment, they repeatedly argued that such a sustained level of commitment was not as important for their children. Many core members said that it was more difficult for the young to be committed to a church, that socialising, university, raising a family and the burden of careers and buying a house all interfered with the ability of their children to commit themselves to a church. This point was interesting because they believed it was more difficult for their children, yet many of them had described how they had maintained a commitment to a church in equally, or more, demanding circumstances.

A second issue was that although core members expressed a desire for their children to be members of a church they were often unhappy and confused over their ability to influence their children's behaviour in this area. Members thought that too much pressure on their children to attend church would not only create hostility and resentment in their children but that such pressure was not consistent with the nature of church attendance.

Some members were angry at what they saw as the insensitive treatment of Christianity and worship in schools. They blamed schools for alienating children from Christianity through their inadequate religious education and the poor quality of their teaching in Christianity. Yet they also criticised schools for alienating children from Christianity by making children worship against their will and forcing their children to endure worship that was boring, irrelevant and superficial.

Another ambiguity in the way parents perceived their children's relationship to the church was that they did not place the same demands on their children that they placed upon themselves. By their own admission core members regularly made significant sacrifices of time money and energy to ensure that they sustained their commitment to a church. Some core members had made these sacrifices for significant portions of their lives and some for their entire lives. Yet the majority of them thought that similar demands on their children was a deterrent to regular church attendance.

In retrospect it is not surprising that the children of members of both congregations were also ambiguous in their reply to questions about their future commitment to the church. Overall the teenagers were positive about their relationship to the church. They appeared to enjoy the contact with the church and they spoke eloquently and knowledgeably about their faith. In contrast to the warmth and enthusiasm they expressed in interviews and while I was observing them, the majority believed that their commitment would decline or end in the near future.

Like their parents the teenagers did not appear to identify their (anticipated) lack of commitment as a problem for themselves or for the church. Similarly many core members understood the decline of membership in the church as a whole in positive terms.

Among the core membership in both congregations, the communication of commitment to the next generation was a puzzling topic. Their own commitment was an important factor in their lives, and something which they could speak about both passionately and in depth. In contrast the potentially declining commitment of their children and the declining commitment of individuals within their own church were discussed more coolly and considerably less passion.

A personal journey

A further aspect of the process by which commitment is communicated is the question of how adult members were introduced to the church. How was commitment communicated to them? Core members believed that they should not intervene in their children's relationship to the church. They were keen to stress that commitment is a personal and individual journey that cannot be forced. In the interviews it was clear that many members believed their own experience of joining a church confirmed this view.

In the section in the questionnaire 'You and Your Church', I asked, 'How were first introduced to this church?'. The 42% replied 'I introduced myself'. Twenty per cent said they were introduced through their involvement in a rite of passage. Twenty-seven per cent said they were introduced 'Through a friend or a member of my family'.

If the returns from the questionnaires are taken on their own it seems as though members believed that their commitment to the church was initiated by themselves alone. However the information from the interviews and other data from the questionnaires suggests that the communication of commitment is not as isolated a process as members believed it to be.

In the interviews I asked members how they were introduced to the church. It was clear that only a tiny minority had joined the church as independently as the results from the

questionnaires suggested. The answer to this contradiction seemed to lie in the way that members understood their decision to join a church. From the interviews it seemed as though the vast majority of members had been introduced to the church through friends, their children or through involvement in a rite of passage. However members insisted that they had joined the church independently because they had taken the decision to join the church independently. Members stressed that they had not joined for social reasons or because they had been persuaded to by others. Rather they had joined the church because they had independently taken the decision to do so.

Another factor that needs to be considered is the possible relationship between their own childhood experiences of a church and the probability that there is a link between past contact with a church and current membership. In the majority of cases core members of both churches had attended church as children. This factor seemed to give weight to the observation made by several members that childhood church membership could translate into adult membership. This was not because children inevitably continued attending church but because those who attended church as children would experience less fear or trepidation at the prospect of attending church as adults.

Three interesting factors emerged from questions about childhood and or previous church experience. The first was that only 20% were lifetime attendees. Most had attended as children but most had also stopped attending at one or more points in their lives for considerable periods of time. The breaks in church membership tended to happen at specific times, common examples being late teens, going to college and the arrival of children. This pattern may partly explain why their own children prophesied that their own commitment to a church would be intermittent, in foreseeing this trend they were merely echoing their own parents' experiences.

The similarity between the perceptions of children and their parents was echoed in the reasons they gave for leaving the church. Adult members explained that at certain times in their lives 'there was just too much going on', or that 'sometimes you have other priorities'. Most members I spoke to did not regret the intermittent nature of their church membership. Lucy, who answered with a straightforward 'no' to the question 'Did you miss anything when you didn't go to church?', gave a typical description of the way in which she left the church:

> I had a brief flirtation with the United Reform - because they had more boys but that stopped. There was a change of vicar, my parents stopped going so I didn't have to go. So even though I didn't dislike church I just stopped.'

Lucy's experience is typical in other ways. The first is that no adult member said they left the church because they found it dull or boring. They left because of a variety of factors but it

was rarely a conscious decision but rather something that happened over a period of time. Like their children, who never identified the style of worship at their church or any other aspect of church life as a reason for their leaving, adult members said they left church because of changes in their lives not because they rejected the church.

The second is that Lucy is one of the 42% who had attended church as a child, but not the Church of England. One of the characteristics of the denominational background of the people I interviewed was that not only was it diverse but that the choice of church appeared to be random and arbitrary. Sometimes the closeness of a particular church, the number of boys in the congregation or because friends went there were all given as reasons why as children or teenagers they attended particular churches.

The arbitrary character of the factors influencing the choice of denomination at this age is mirrored by the equally arbitrary reasons for attending church in the first place. The results of the questionnaire show that 41% received only casual encouragement from their parents to attend church. Just as current members shy away from pressurising their children into attending church, their parents also preferred not to force their children. The interviews confirmed just how random and inconsistent parental encouragement to attend church actually was.

I asked one woman if her parents had encouraged her to go to church as a child. She said:

> No. I started at Sunday School with loads of other tots and we just went together. We went en masse – it's another hour rid of the children, especially in the afternoon, which is why parents didn't go.

The church as childminder was a recurring theme in interviewees' recollections of their early church life. As children or teenagers, members were often encouraged to attend a range of groups: Sunday School. Brownies, Guides, Scouts and cubs, groups in which attendance at a church was an almost accidental by-product.

For many members parental encouragement to attend church was non-existent. From the interviews it sometimes appeared as though as children or teenagers members went to church despite their parents, not because of them. One member, who described his father as a 'high days and holidays man' and who had to be 'dragged' to church, told me how his decision to join a church was entirely spontaneous and that his mother only started attending when he was confirmed at 14. Similarly the parents of another woman rekindled their church life and began accompanying their children to church after their neighbours had taken them to a local Methodist church. Worried that their children would become Methodists the parents intervened by taking their children to an Anglican church.

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The interviews and questionnaires provide a complex picture of the way in which members became a part of the church. From the interviews it seemed that childhood contact with a church has no necessary consequences for their later commitment as adults. The memories of childhood and teenage attendance suggest two factors about the way church commitment is formed. The first is that in the case of the 80% of members who are not lifetime attenders, adult church commitment is a qualitatively different phenomenon from their childhood membership. Childhood memories of church were of a membership that was frivolous and immature. Members attributed this to the fact that frivolity and immaturity are normal traits in the young and are therefore no reflection on the quality of their adult membership.

The second factor is that for the majority of core members not only were their childhood experiences of the church immature but the role their parents played in communicating an early commitment to them was minimal. According to many members there was an almost casual quality in the way parents encouraged their children to attend church, if they encouraged them at all. The haphazard and irregular nature of parental encouragement to attend church contrasts sharply with the seriousness with which adult members regard their current membership.

However their parents' attitudes reflect their own attitudes towards the commitment of their children. Just as their parents appeared not to place sustained pressure on them to attend church, so they too have refused to force their children into church. Throughout all the interviews any mention of pressure on the young to attend church was always condemned as negative or counterproductive, and in every instance that pressure always took place in a school environment.

It was impossible for me to tell how accurate members were in their memories of their childhood experiences of the church. Their recollections would conform to the facts of church membership, that is with each generation, fewer people retain lifelong membership and more people leave the church. The fact that so many of the interviewees told similar stories would also suggest that their accounts were reliable.

A more significant point for this thesis is that regardless of the historical accuracy of members' memories, they believed them to be true. The accounts of casual encouragement and parental indifference to their church membership were the traits the majority of members believed characterised their first contact with the church. The implications of this for the way that members understood the communication of their own commitment is that it reinforces their belief that they alone are responsible for their present commitment to the church. Although most of those who had some contact with a church as children believed it was a positive thing because it made their return as adults less alien, most were adamant that their

adult membership was the result of a decision taken by them as adults. That is they were mostly unwilling to consider the possibility that their commitment to the church was the consequence of other factors outside their control. Even those members who came from families that were regular churchgoers usually insisted that the key decision to continue their membership into adulthood was theirs and not the result of social or parental pressure.

The overwhelming theme in the interviews in relation to the communication of commitment was that both adults and teenagers understood the communication of commitment to be an individual and personal journey. It was a process that was touched by parents, peers or neighbours but ultimately one in which they acted independently and alone.

Evangelism - communicating commitment beyond the church

The task of communicating commitment to an audience beyond the existing church and the family of existing members was viewed with the same ambiguity and with even less enthusiasm than that of keeping children in church. As an issue, evangelism situates the discussion of the communication of commitment, as it was seen by the members of St Martin's and St Sebastian's, in the context of the wider national church. The questions and problems raised by evangelism, as single or whole church project are related to the communication of commitment as it is experienced by individual members.

There are no direct questions about the Decade of Evangelism in the questionnaire. In the interviews no one mentioned it unless I mentioned it first and generally it was never a topic that generated interest or passion. Some individuals were unclear as to what the Decade of Evangelism was, some queried whether it applied to their church and some asked me to check if it was actually meant to last for the entire decade. Despite the hesitancy of the core members in discussing evangelism generally and the Decade of Evangelism in particular, there are similarities between the perception of evangelism and the communication of commitment in relation to children.

The first ambiguity in relation to evangelism is that while core members were unenthusiastic about the prospect of evangelising, they did recognise the need for some kind of evangelism to take place. The acknowledgement of this need was evident in the replies to the questionnaires and in the interviews.

In reply to question 1 section F:

'Congregations of the Church of England tend to be older rather than younger, predominately women and mostly middle class. Do you think the Church of England should be trying to change this situation?'

only 7.5% ticked the option, 'No, it's a natural and expected phenomenon'. The low numbers that chose this option suggested that the failure of the church to keep its young was perceived as a problem. Some of the members at St Sebastian's asked me about the young people at St Martin's, what was it about their church that was different, did they do any thing that was specifically aimed at attracting young people? Although some members from both congregations argued that the decline reflected in the figures was not a true reflection of the church,[9] most accepted that there was a decline in numbers and that it was a problem for the church. The congregation were rejecting the idea that they should accept the status quo in regards to their ageing and declining membership.

The remaining replies to the question were almost equally divided between 'Yes, the church should do a great deal more to encourage people from different age groups and communities to join the church' and 'It is the responsibility of both laity and clergy to work together to rebuild the church'. Both these replies suggest that evangelism of some kind is necessary for the health of the church. The wording of the first option was designed to imply a stronger commitment to evangelism and the second to imply that while evangelism is supported, it is supported on a small, local scale.

The fact that almost half the people who completed the questionnaires recognised a strong need for evangelism and almost half recognised some need for evangelism led me to expect that I would find a firm commitment to the Decade of Evangelism in the interviews.

This belief was initially reinforced by the responses to questions about the establishment of the Church of England. In the data produced by the questionnaire there was no strong preference for either establishment or disestablishment. The replies were almost equally divided between the statements on the constitutional position of the Church of England. However in the interviews members were more likely to support the continued establishment of the church.

The most common reason for supporting the establishment of the church was that members believed that the consequences of disestablishment would be the withdrawal of a distinct Christian voice from public life. Core members repeatedly explained that the main advantage of establishment was that whenever issues of morality or social injustice were discussed in public the media were obliged to allow a prominent spokesperson from the church to intervene in the debate. Establishment forced a Christian interpretation of the world on to the agenda when it might otherwise have been excluded.

Many core members also argued that establishment of the Church of England conferred status on the church. The inclusion of the church in the apparatus of the state was equal to the

assumption that Christianity was an important element in the life of the nation. Some members believed that without establishment, Christianity, or a Christian viewpoint would become as marginalised as the Baptist voice or the Jewish voice in the media. In this sense some core members also believed that the establishment of the church acted as a form of evangelism. Merely by its presence the Church of England was a beacon to individuals who might want to seek out the church. The establishment of the church meant that the church was allowed a say in the statutory requirements for religious education and that the church was expected to play a certain ceremonial role on important national occasions. All these factors contribute to the process of evangelism and make a more proactive form of evangelism easier.

The problem of Evangelism in Britain

Although the interviews did not dwell on evangelism explicitly, both the questionnaire and the interviews covered many of the key issues related to evangelism. The most obvious of these were the decline of membership in the Church of England and what could be done to stop it and why people left the church.

Among the membership of both churches there were differences of opinion but on some issues there was a virtual consensus. The first was an impression that the decline in membership was exaggerated, they were aware that it was a steady and constant process but not that it had reached crisis proportions. Some members were particularly surprised because they believed that membership, across the church as whole was beginning to rise. The second was that the task of halting decline was one best addressed on an individual level rather than through a public or national campaign. All church members whom I interviewed agreed that evangelising should only be carried out in very specific conditions and that attempting to evangelise without proper preparation and consideration of local conditions could be counter productive for the church and a demoralising experience for the Christians involved.

Evangelism: Harder today than in the past.

Members constantly reminded me that to be a Christian today was very different from being a Christian a hundred years ago. In several interviews I was also told that being a Christian in England was particularly difficult because it appeared to be so easy. In countries where Christianity was a minority faith or where Christians were discriminated against to be a Christian is easier because outside pressures compel even the 'spiritually lazy' to profess their faith in some way. To be a Christian in England is problematic for several reasons. In England, where every body presumes everybody else is a Christian, it is difficult to maintain one's own commitment to Christianity let alone pursue other to go to church. Living as a Christian is also difficult not only because people are ignorant about Christianity, but also because people presume that active Christians are odd or unusual.

The leadership of the Church of England shares the view that evangelism is more difficult in the West. Not only has the Church of England discussed the difficulties it faces in this respect but many Anglicans have acknowledged that it is a task they have avoided (Marshall, M. 1991: 3). In 1989 The Board for Mission and Unity published a paper outlining the commitment of the Church of England to the forthcoming Decade of Evangelism. It reaffirmed the resolution of the 1988 Lambeth Conference that 'evangelism is the primary task given to the church' but that 'Europe is probably the continent in which the evangelist faces the most intractable difficulties' (General Synod, 1989: 2 *The Decade of Evangelism*).

The meeting of SOMA (Sharing of Ministries Abroad) before the Lambeth Conference of 1988 'spoke with white hot passion of the burgeoning of evangelism in Africa, Asia and in South America'. In contrast the conclusion to the 1989 General Synod Report on Evangelism was pessimistic about the success of future evangelistic ventures by the church. It stated that 'the Church of England is not adequately motivated or prepared to meet the challenges. Neither the Ramsey call nor the Coggan call managed to get evangelism to the top of the Church of England agenda. Will the Runcie call fare any better?' (Church Times, 22.1.89. Evangelism: reluctance to meet the challenge).

Ordained, laity and the leadership of the Church of England appear to agree that evangelism in Britain today is a difficult task. One elderly woman I interviewed suggested that the her church 'was not that sort of church', and that it would be ridiculous for the people in her church 'to do that sort of thing'. Although this particular woman recognised the need for evangelism she was shocked that need might translate into activity on her part. She is not alone in judging that her church is ill-suited or uncomfortable with the prospect of evangelism.

In the church itself there is a feeling among some people that the Church of England is not ready for such a venture. The number and quality of parish vicars are often cited among the reasons for this inability. As the decade began the number of men offering themselves for ordination was declining (Church Times. 6.1.89. *Bid to Halt Trend in Ordination*.p1). The low morale of the laity in relation to evangelism was also considered a serious problem by the church (Church Times.14.4.89: 4). There is also the consideration that as the status of clergy has diminished in society their workload has increased leading to a body of leaders who feel unappreciated and exhausted (Grundy, M. 1998: 74-93). There was also a problem with the qualities of the existing clergy and their evangelistic skills. Clergy preferred ministering to their existing congregation rather than engaging in evangelism. A consultation paper produced by Partners in Mission suggested that 'not only did the church as a whole suffer from the lack of a sense of urgency in evangelism, its clergy are pastorally, not evangelistically minded'[10] (*Partners in Mission Consultation*. Church House.1981: 81). Another issue that relates the

possibility of successful evangelism to the parish vicar is that members are dependent on their vicar to the extent that they are unable of engaging in activities that demand they operate with a certain amount of independence (Reed, B. 1978: 16).

Renewal

Core members identified the vagueness of the term evangelism as one reason why it was more difficult to evangelise today than in the past. When I introduced the subject of evangelism in interviews the first response of the interviewee would be to ask me what I meant by that term. When I asked them what they understood by evangelism, their replies were varied, sometimes vague and confused and sometimes in conflict with one another.

Within the Church of England, the Decade of Evangelism has, in some cases, provoked a reaffirmation of their desire to communicate their own beliefs to as many as possible outside the church.[11] Generally this is not the case for the majority of the laity in St Sebastian's and at St Martin's.

When I asked core members to describe how they understood evangelism, many of them talked of the need to renew the existing membership, both in their own church and others. The renewal they were referring to was both a spiritual renewal and the remotivation of members who had once been active but had drifted away. Both these interpretations of evangelism are common in the Church of England generally[12] and in both the congregations I worked with, but the project of spiritual renewal was particularly strong in St Martin's.

The most obvious form in which members at St Martin's talked about spiritual renewal was in their discussion of their experiences in Cursillo. Most of the core members I spoke to in St Martin's had been involved in a movement called Cursillo. It began as a movement for spiritual renewal in Spain and has spread through several Christian denominations all over the world. Everything I know about the movement I know from Christians who were involved in it outside of Britain. In Britain Cursillo prefers to remain a private organisation which likes to restrict knowledge about its activities to people who have participated in its weekend conferences and in the following support groups.

The core members I spoke to would tell me nothing about what happened at the conferences or in the support group. They all stressed, however, that Cursillo had made an amazing impact on their religious lives, that they had become 'spiritually exhilarated' or that they 'were an entirely new type of Christian after the weekend' and that 'their lives as Christians had been transformed'. The language they used to describe their experiences with Cursillo was usually fulsome and their tone of voice was animated, warm and excited.

A few of the interviewees were a little embarrassed by the secrecy but one woman explained that even if she was at liberty to share her experiences she doubted whether she could adequately communicate what had happened to her to someone who had not experienced it for themselves. At St Martin's the enthusiasm over plans to involve other members of the congregation in Cursillo weekends was far greater than the general attitude towards evangelising people outside the church. I asked several core members why this was. All of them told me that although they believed that traditional evangelisation was an important job for the church, unless movements like Cursillo spread through the church the laity would lack the spiritual energy to become effective evangelists.

Some core members identified spiritual renewal with evangelism and regarded the Decade of Evangelism as an opportunity to reinvigorate their own spiritual health. Other members acknowledged that renewal was only one aspect of evangelism or that renewal had to take place before the congregation were in a position to evangelise. In the preparations for the Decade of Evangelism the church had discussed both the importance of renewal and the importance of not replacing evangelism with renewal.[13] In the case of St Martin's and St Sebastian's renewal was a more popular interpretation of evangelising. For some core members it was the only aspect of evangelising that they had engaged in, or were prepared to engage in. Like members of other churches many felt that the struggle to win new members to the church was simply not their responsibility.[14]

Back to basics

I asked some members why they thought trying to draw new people, especially younger people, into the church was a more demanding task today than it was in the past. One factor which most core members identified as significant was the relative ignorance of young people about Christianity. One member described the difference as one between 'a country where Christianity is the norm' and 'a country where Christianity is the hobby of a few'. Today the language and symbols and key ideas of Christianity are not as prevalent, familiar or well known as they were in the past,[15] and some commentators have identified this as a significant barrier to the churches attempt to stop its decline.

John Finney the Church of England officer for the Decade of Evangelism has noted this problem. He warns the modern evangelist that today there is no longer the luxury of presuming either sympathy or knowledge in its potential new audience. He argues that there is a substantial group within the population (50%) who know nothing at all about Christianity and have no feeling or affinity for the church. He believes that this group is significant for the church, not only because it represents the half of the population to whom the church is an alien institution, but because it will be the success of the church in communicating with this group which will determine whether the 'decade will succeed or fail' (Finney, J. 1991:8).

In some conversations about the need to attract new people to the church, members described the need to 'go back to scratch' and of having to 'start at the beginning'. The extent of this problem and the pressure experienced by many of the core members in having to deal with it was illustrated at a family service at St Martin's.

St Martin's organised monthly family services where parents were encouraged to bring their children. The service itself is designed to engage the children; lively music, games, quizzes and stories are used to keep their attention and present Christianity in the most attractive way possible. At one family service the focus was on the Ten Commandments. In the course of the service it became apparent that no child in the congregation could list more than three commandments. Despite prompting from the man leading the service, the children could only think of variations of the same three commandments or invented new commandments of their own in a response to the plea 'we only talked about this last week'.

In interviews following this service some members used the disappointing display of knowledge in the family service as an example of just how huge the task of evangelising was. Members assumed a link between Biblical knowelge and faith and were therefore disappointed at the public display of ignorance by the children.[16] One St Martin's church member used the example of the family service as an indication of just how immense the task of evangelising was for the modern church. If the children of church members were demonstrably ignorant of the very rudiments of the Bible how little must everyone else know.

The evangelical fishing pool

The last factor identified by core-members as making a contribution to the Herculean task of evangelising was that the church as an institution was more isolated in society than it was in the past. Some older members could remember when the parish church was central to every aspect of the local life of the community. The church maintained links with other clubs and societies, and there was a greater interaction between the different groups that existed in any one area.

A couple who had been a member of St Martin's for over 30 years described how in the past the curate would 'go knocking on doors' when he heard that someone new had moved into the area. The curate would 'call in informally' to ask if the newcomers wanted to visit the church and to introduce himself. Jessica, from St Sebastian's and a resident of the parish for 40 years, described how her father, a vicar, would follow a similar policy of making himself known to the parish:

> I had wonderful parents. My father was a vicar, I was brought up in the vicarage and looking back I can see that our door was always open. We used to say - there's the door bell; don't forget the vicarage smile - that meant you were supposed to go to the door and make people welcome. My father had everyone in the house even people who never came to church; we used to know everyone and everyone knew us.

In some respects the church has maintained the links with other groups and churches nationally and at the parochial level.[17] In other respects the informal links that lead to the creation of relationships that might lead to new members have become scarce and more volatile.

In *Evangelism that Really Works*, the Revd Clarke discusses approaches to evangelism that are relevant to the modern church. In a chapter on the dynamics behind growth, he describes the impact on a church when it can no longer use these relationships to evangelise. Clarke argues that in order to evangelise a church must have a 'fringe'- a periphery of individuals, contacts, families and networks that act as a 'fishing-pool' for a church. The fishing pool provides the raw material with which evangelists work because in it are the individuals who are most likely to be receptive to the church as a result of some kind of informal or distant contact. So important is this fringe that Clarke goes so far as to say that 'Without a fringe, evangelism is almost impossible' (Clarke, J. 1995:18) .

For many churches the types of activities and groups that once generated a 'fringe' are no longer relevant or else they do not work as the foundation blocs of evangelisation. An example of this is the effectiveness of Sunday schools as a mechanism for the nurture of young Christians. Today Sunday schools do not perform the function they did in the past. Core members spoke of running them as an unavoidable duty. The only responsibility members spoke of with less enthusiasm was singing in the choir. One woman explained that her once monthly 'stint' in the Sunday school was 'the price I pay for the other three Sundays in the month'. Another women described how manning the Sunday School was so unpopular that she had been forced to organise the 'most extensive rota in the world' so that members would never have to man the Sunday school more than once every few months.

When I asked why the Sunday school was so unpopular members assured me that it was not because they didn't like children. Most of them pointed out that their own children were in the Sunday school. I asked several members if the Sunday school was not one of the earliest opportunities to evangelise. One mother of three raised her eyebrows when I asked her this question and replied 'not in my family it isn't'. She asked me to consider how few of the children who attended Sunday school were actually confirmed let alone those who went on to become adult church members. Part of the unpopularity of the Sunday school duty appeared to lie in the idea that it was nothing more than a baby-sitting job.

In the interviews there was certainly never any indication that members understood the role of the Sunday school as anything more than a chore, and certainly not as an opportunity to evangelise. The wider church recognises that Sunday school no longer plays a significant role in nurturing faith in the young (General Synod, July.1990 4.) and the Church of England working party on children concluded that Sunday schools actually had a negative influence on children's relationship to the church (Children in the Way, 1988: 12).

Another example of how past mechanisms for integrating the 'fringe' into the main body of the congregation no longer work today is the process of individuals becoming members through marriage. In his study of the church, Thompson noted that in churches where recruitment took place marriage was the most common method (Thompson, R. 1957: 84). At St Martin's and St Sebastian's not only did about 15 to 25% of couples attend without their spouses, but even those individuals who would have liked their spouses to accompany them were antagonistic to the idea that they could convert them. I asked individuals whose spouses were not churchgoers if they had ever tried or been tempted to try to involve their wives or husbands in the church. The most common response was that unchurched spouses 'would come if they wanted to' or that 'they can make their own minds up'. Marriage may have offered opportunities for evangelism in the past or in other churches,[18] but among the married people who attended church on their own at St Martin's and St Sebastian's it was not an institution that could be exploited in this way.

Despite the closure of some avenues for evangelism both St Martin's and St Sebastian's had a 'fringe'. I was not able to gauge exactly how successful they were in using these relationships to evangelise but certain features about the fringe were apparent.

The congregation at St Sebastian's was almost stagnant. At the time I visited the church new members rarely attended the church and the bulk of the congregation was composed of members who had worshipped at the church for some time. Their links with the local university rarely generated even a temporary influx of new members and the majority of children from the Sunday school did not graduate into the main congregation for any significant period of time. Core members of the congregation maintained relationships with individuals and groups outside the church but as the stagnant character of the membership showed these relationships rarely resulted in an introduction to the church or new members.

When I first visited St Martin's, the size of the congregation and the mix of ages led me to believe there was a substantial fringe and that this was a congregation that did have an influx of new members. The church did have some new members but in the constant process of gaining members and losing members there was a net loss.

St Martin's organised several groups and forums for meeting and encouraging new people towards the church independently and in conjunction with other churches in the Whitstable team. Apart from services St Martin's was host to a Mothers' Union, a Women's fellowship group, a social club, the young wives group, a regular sports night, a kindergarten, a Sunday club, a junior church; it participated in exchanges with Christians from abroad, numerous fundraising activities, garden parties and mothers and toddlers groups.

The most significant fact about the many groups and activities organised by St Martin's church was not that they were well attended but that membership of these groups did not regularly translate into new members for the church. Like many other churches,[19] St Martin's is aware of the mechanisms and procedures that could generate new members but the organisation of such groups does not necessarily generate new members. Also in common with some churches the core congregation appeared to equate the attendance at these groups with evangelical success. That members of the various groups only rarely went on to become church members was not highlighted as a problem[20] because the fact that the groups existed and provided a potential forum for involvement and growth was interpreted as a positive initiative in itself.

Evangelism - the new context

The discussion of evangelism in interviews generated a variety of responses. One of the most common was that evangelism is not a more difficult task today than in the past, but that it is an entirely different task today than it was in the past. Core members from both churches were unhappy with certain types and styles of evangelism, which they felt, were inappropriate in today's conditions.

They identified the existence of other religions and the presence of 'different types of people' as factors which contributed to the new conditions in which the church had to evangelise. Members were concerned that any attempt on the part of the church to evangelise should not be seen as a criticism of other religions. Some members felt that the presence of other religions in Britain means that the church, especially the national church, had to acknowledge the importance and integrity of other faiths. Some members told me that both as individuals and as part of a church they were always sensitive to the charge of insensitivity towards other religions, as was the church itself.[21] Religious pluralism was a factor that needed to be considered in any plan for evangelism.

Core members also identified the existence of groups of people 'who wouldn't dream of setting foot inside a church' and people who 'believe all sorts of nonsense about us' as another factor to be considered by the church. I asked members why they thought church membership was declining and what they thought the church could do to win new members to

the church. A common reply was that the church as a whole and the individual congregation needed to make the church and the message of Christianity 'more relevant' and 'more accessible' to people for whom the church was an alien mystery.

At St Martin's the family service was often cited as an example of the attempt to make Christianity more accessible. Members of both churches identified the Alternative Service Book and the introduction of the Peace as further strategies employed by the church to appeal to potential new members. But members of both churches agreed that measures like these were not adequate because they did not really go far enough. Some core members were obviously frustrated at what they identified as the slow response of the church to the need to appeal to new audiences but they were also wary of introducing styles of worship and of evangelical strategies that were too radical.

When I asked members what they meant by making 'Christianity more relevant' they often replied that they were sure it was possible to show that Christianity was relevant to every life but they themselves did not have the answers. I asked some members what they thought of the more extreme and theatrical methods of presenting Christian worship that had been introduced by churches elsewhere in the country. They unanimously responded to suggestions of 'raves in the naves' or 'waves at the graves'[22] with alarm and the warning that certain kinds of evangelism were more suited to other types of churches.

A common theme in the discussion in the church leading up to the Decade of Evangelism was that evangelism always needs to be focused and particular rather than broad and sweeping.[23] Others within the church have also noted that it is not just certain groups within society that have to be considered carefully but an entire generation. The baby boomers, with their distrust of large organisations and their desire for choice, present a new challenge for an evangelising church (Brierly, P. 1991: 95).

This caution has resulted in the ways which churches participate in the Decade of Evangelism. The decision of churches to participate in the Decade of Evangelism is taken church by church. There is no national strategy or plan and the variety of ways that churches can engage in evangelism, from renewing the commitment of existing members to mounting advertising campaigns are all counted as essential elements of evangelism.

The caution of the church in suggesting a national evangelical campaign is reflected in the growing suspicion expressed by many church members towards traditional evangelical methods. Core and non-core members disapproved of 'standing on street corners' or 'shouting about it' or 'bothering people on their doorsteps as though Christianity was an election campaign'. Clarke believes that many Christians feel uneasy about evangelism because they associate it with a particular style of evangelism or what he terms 'bad,

insensitive evangelism' (Clarke, J. 1995: 3). Other research on the impact of 'insensitive evangelism' confirms that certain styles of evangelism are counterproductive[24] and that church members themselves can be unwilling and resistant to participating in events that makes many 'of those who have a longing to share their faith shudder at the very name of evangelism' (Finney, J. 1992: 25).

A new evangelism

The unease experienced by the congregations of St Martin's and St Sebastian's at the prospect of evangelising is evident throughout the wider church. The prospect of attempting to communicate their beliefs and commitment to people who have no interest or familiarity with Christianity has promoted several discussions on the legitimacy of evangelism. One discussion is the idea of the post-evangelical. The post-evangelical is a term used by Dave Tomlinson, a leader in the house church movement, in the book of same name. The post evangelical is some one who wants the church to grow but who feels alienated from past ideas that informed the evangelical process.

In *The Post-Evangelical* Tomlinson explicitly discusses evangelism in the context of postmodern society. *The Post-Evangelical* was published half way through the Decade of Evangelism and the book is offer both an assessment of what Tomlinson interprets as the failure of traditional evangelism and a strategy for a future successful evangelism. He argues that for many people inside and outside the church the traditional form of evangelism is the direct cause of many people leaving the church or even of rejecting Christianity (Tomlinson, D.1997: 2).

The critique of the church and evangelism offered by Tomlinson shares some of the presumptions articulated by the church itself. His demand that the church modernise not only the style of worship and the way it presents its message to the world but the message itself is already an issue that is under discussion within the mainstream of the church.[25]

Tomlinson's views echoed many of the sentiments expressed by both congregations in interviews. They often presented the drift from a formulaic and prescriptive Christianity as a healthy development and celebrated their children's independence in rejecting Christianity or deciding to follow their own beliefs.

Both congregations were aware, to some extent, that the conditions in which faith exists and is communicated through and between families or to those outside the church has changed. There was an awareness that the context in which their faith existed had changed and there was an acceptance of the new pressures and demands that made the communication of their beliefs a less simple task than in the past. Core members not only accepted change but in

many cases they welcomed the changes and criticised the church for not adapting its message fast enough.

I heard echoes of these views in interviews with church members although there was one significant difference. Core members believed that evangelism was important for the survival of the church. They agreed that the church needed to make itself attractive to young people and that the ageing church population contributed to the growing isolation of the church in society. However the core members I spoke to were ambivalent about the prospect of evangelising themselves, even if the form of evangelising was that proposed by Tomlinson.

Core members generally thought that they were already contributing to the evangelising process through the activities they were already committed to. The most common example I was presented with as an example of how members were engaged in building the church was involvement in the groups that advised and counselled people who wanted to get married, have their child baptised or who sought counselling after a bereavement. Members identified their participation in these groups as essentially evangelical because one of the aims of these groups was that after the particular rite was finished the newly involved people would become regular church members.

Another common evangelical activity was the involvement of church members in voluntary groups in the community. Some members cited their participation in running charity shops or helping at the local hospital as their personal contribution towards building the church. One woman who had been involved in voluntary work organised by the church for several years explained why she thought it was an important activity:

> I'm on the team that helps at the hospital. It's hard work and sometimes it's very upsetting but it's important that people there know that we care and we're there if they need us. It's so important that people see Christians. How else will they know where to go if they should want to talk to us.

The post-evangelical, as envisaged by Tomlinson, is actively engaged with the project of attracting new people into the church and of discovering new audiences for Christianity. Tomlinson's definition is fluid and flexible but it rests on the desire and explicit aim of engaging with the problem of increasing the number of Christians. Although many of the church members I interviewed recommended similar activities and approaches to those mentioned by Tomlinson they were generally more hesitant than Tomlinson in certain areas. Some of them believed that spiritual renewal was the central aim of evangelism and others that their current involvement in various church groups already constituted a form of evangelism. Some members thought that the church needed to evangelise but that it was a

project best suited to other churches. Others described how they recognised the importance of evangelising but that they themselves had no answers to the problem.

Conclusion

In some respects the views of both congregations on the communication of commitment was determined by the generation of the interviewee. Even though the teenage members of the church knew that membership in their respective churches was declining and they understood that decline was a national characteristic of church membership, they did not perceive the failure of the church to communicate commitment from one generation to the next as an important issue. They believed that church commitment was something that individuals adopted and abandoned during their lives depending on the circumstances. While people were church members it was an important part of their lives but when they were not church members it did not diminish the quality of their Christianity.

Adult church members shared some of their children's views on the communication of commitment. Adults and teenagers were certain that 'forcing' or 'pressurising' or in any way trying to make young people go to church when they didn't want to was detrimental. Members believed that their own experiences in joining the church vindicated their understanding of how people became members of a church. Adults and teenagers also believed that in some cases a fall in membership was positive because it indicated that attendance was voluntary and not the result of parental coercion or a desire to be socially acceptable.

Adults were more likely to identify the decline in membership as an important issue for the church although their attitudes were still ambiguous. One area where perceptions and views were often contradictory was in relation to parent's attitudes to their children's membership of a church. Parents wanted their children to learn about Christianity in school, sometimes to the exclusion of learning about other religions, but they were generally unsure if they wanted their children to be members of a church. In interviews some parents said they were not disappointed that their children were not church members and yet they made excuses for their children's absence from church and others made allowances for their children, which they did not permit themselves.

This uncertainty was further reflected in the attitude of the congregations towards evangelism and the Decade of Evangelism. Evangelism was an area of church life which members seemed uncomfortable with. They did not talk enthusiastically about it and they were unclear about the aims of the Decade of Evangelism. Some members wanted to redefine evangelism as spiritual renewal and some believed that it was enough that they tend to their own spiritual health. In the context of Cursillo they were passionate and committed. Many Cursillo

members were not only invigorated by their experiences but also believed that this was the way forward for the church.

However this passion was never evident in conversations about rebuilding church membership. Discussions about different evangelical strategies and techniques and the overall prospects for the church in terms of membership were subdued, tenuous and sometimes resigned. The prospect of communicating their commitment to either their children or to people outside the church was daunting and beset with confusion and ambiguity.

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[1] The number of infant baptisms taking place within the church has fallen dramatically in the last 30 years. In 1973 nearly half of all children born in the country were baptised, 298,000 in total. In 1997 less than a third of all children were baptised, that is 139,000 in total (*Church Statistics Parochial Membership and Finance Statistics*, 1997: 24.).

[2] Since the introduction of legislation to allow marriages to take place in a wider variety of venue the number of weddings in churches has dropped. The proportion of marriages in approved premises doubled between 1996 and 1997. In contrast religious weddings fell from 115, 000 to 102, 000 in the same period. It is estimated that of those marriages that took place in approved premises, 26% of them would have previously taken place in an Anglican church. (Haskey, J. 1998: 14)

[3] The number of children attending Church of England Sunday Schools has fallen significantly over the last 50 years as has the number of teenagers attending services and the number of young people seeking confirmation. (Tigwell, J. 1980: 25)

[4] Developmental theories in Educational Psychology suggest that before the age of about 10 or 11 chidren find it difficult to talk with any degree of objectivity about their experiences (Kholberg, L. 1981:17-19).

[5] The high percentage of children at grammar or private schools is significant in this instance because of the nature of education in Kent. The 11-plus operates as the system of selection for secondary education with the majority of children going to a secondary modern. The fact that all the teenagers went to grammar schools indicated that none of them went to school locally.

[6] The relationship between children who regularly attend church and their views on the importance of the church in society , the importance of moral education and Religious Education in particular, has been clearly established in other research. Leslie Francis and John Lewis argue that 'there is a very clear relationship between attitude towards religious education and attitude towards the place of the church in society. Pupils who support the place of religious education in schools are more likely to see the relevance of the church and of the Bible for life today than pupils who reject the place of religious education in schools' (Francis, L. and Lewis, J. (1996)

[7] The British Council of Churches Youth Unit initiated a study of teenagers and the church in 1987. Its results are based on the results of 1,328 questionnaires. They found that there were clear differences between the behaviour of Anglican teenagers and teenagers from other

denominations in relation to Church attendance. They found that 'Anglican teenagers were more politically right wing, more racist, more morally liberal and less certain of their religious beliefs than young Catholics or young members of the Free Churches. Young Anglicans were also more likely to lapse from church membership than members of other denominations' (Market Town Christianity Today: the teenager Response, (1988), *Religion Today*, 14, 3, 3 - 5.).

[8] Rogers believes that in some interview situations the nond-irective approach to questioning can aid social research. By allowing the interviewee to dictate the direction of the interview they will often talk more openly than if you maintained obvious control of the interview (Rogers, C. 1945: 280).

[9] Brierly argues that recent decline is partly due to the death of older members and their non-replacement by new members, and therefore the figures do not reflect a real decline (Brierly, P. 1991: 31).

[10] The pastoral inclinations of the clergy are compounded by the tendency for congregations to adopt the preoccupations and style of their minister - so that at a time when the church is seeking evangelists it is more likely to produce congregations more suited to pastoral care (Partners in Mission Consultation: 1981: 81).

[11] John Finney, the Church of England officer for the Decade of Evangelism is an example of someone in the church who has welcomed the challenge of evangelising outside the church. In his writings on the subject he has spoken of the 'passion for souls' and of 'the special love which we are called to share' (Finney, J. 1992:26).

[12] The Right Reverend Thurd Bishop of Dover has argued that there is a false sense of security among some churches because they believe that they are attracting new members into the church. This success is an illusion because new people in churches are normally from other denominations or from other churches and are therefore not new at all. He sees this as a problematic trend because if it continues the church will continue to diminish in size (Church Times. Stagnant Churches Facing Extinction. 19.8.88:3).

[13] Revd. Michael Marshall, Director of the Anglican Institute in Missouri and former Bishop of Woolwich argues that without renewal in the church, the Decade of Evangelism is a meaningless gesture. He also notes that renewal is only the first stage, and that on its own renewal is not enough to secure a successful evangelical mission. (Marshall, M. 1991: 10)

[14] Marshall notes that some clergy and congregations are reluctant to face the 'bald fact that at heart many congregations simply do not want to grow' (Marshall, M. 1991: 82).

[15] The leadership of the Church of England has acknowledged this problem. A report by the Board for Mission and Unity, *Evangelism Today* notes that in practice evangelism makes different demands on the church today. One reason for this is that in the past the church could rely on an undercurrent of Christian awareness in society.

[16] Research suggests that there is no direct relationship between religious behaviour and Biblical knowledge in children. (Francis, L. 1984)

[17] See chapter on the Value of Community.

[18] Finney found that 22% of men said that their partner had been the main factor in bringing them to God and 5% of women said the same (Finney, J. 1992: 38). Although these figures may appear to contradict my own findings, it is possible that he would have found similar response to mine if he had asked married individuals whose partners were not church members.

[19] As part of the Decade of Evangelism, John Finney published research on the ways individuals joined the church. He found that the church's activities were rarely the mechanism by which members became Christians (Finney, J. 1992: 36).

[20]In *Evangelism that Really Works* Clarke describes the results of a survey he conducted on how effectively churches used different groups to evangelise. Sixty per cent of the churches said that the groups were good or adequate vehicles for evangelism. Clarke found that after he had talked to many of the ministers involved, it is probable that less than 10 per cent of the groups over all had even one person a year becoming a Christian through their efforts. (Clark, J. 1995:35)

[21] At the beginning of the Decade of Evangelism the Church of England warned members that they must be sensitive to the beliefs of other faiths. The Decade of Evangelism 1989 report quotes the Section Report on Mission and Ministry in its warning that evangelism should not be in any way coercive.

[22] The Rev. Robin Gamble of Bradford included pubs as well as the Bible into his alternative Lentern Retreats. He also introduced alternative-style services as well as dressing up as Freddie Mercury as a way of making the services more appealing. He called his services 'waves at the graves' and used dry ice and projections to enliven the services.(Guardian, Seeking a Fresh Cut of the Clerical Cloth. 17. 2. 97)

[23] The Board for Mission and Unity produced a succession of reports including the 1981 Partners in Mission Consultation which produced *To A Rebellious House* in 1981, *The Mission Audit* of 1984 and *The Measure of Mission* in 1987. Each document discussed evangelism and emphasised the need for sensitivity, caution and locality.

[24] In their study of the attitudes of children and adolescents towards Christianity, W. Kay and L. Francis found that a positive attempt to attract pupils to Christianity in schools often had a negative effect. (Francis, L. And Kay, W.1996: 25)

[25] There are several areas where the message as well as style has been modified in recent times. An example of this is marriage and cohabitation. In 1995 the Board for Social Responsibility recommended that the church should not be judgemental about fornication. The Bishop of Sherwood, The Right Reverend Alan Morgan who chaired the working party insisted that the church was not abandoning its teaching on marriage. (Guardian. 7.6.95) A survey conducted two years later indicated that 44 diocesan bishops of the Church of England no longer believe that cohabitating couples are living in sin (Sunday Times. 12.10.97).

Chapter 6

The value of community

The aim of this chapter is not to define community or even church members' definition of community; rather its focus is to explore the value which members place upon community as an ideal and to look at their perceived experience of community. The value members place upon community is important because of the relationship between their commitment to the church and their understanding of their congregations as communities. The value which members place in the idea of community and the values they attribute to communities underlie and inform their commitment to their congregations. This chapter begins with an exploration of the extent to which members value community and describes their understanding of the particular qualities they attribute to community. It concludes with an analysis of the tension between their idealisation of community and their sometimes less than ideal experience of those communities.

In *The Church and the Market Place* Archbishop Carey outlines his hopes for the church and the future relationship between the church and society. Throughout the book he refers to community in two separate but related ways. He continually urges church members to consider their position as individuals in the community (Carey, G. 1995: 153). He reminds Christians that their church life should not absorb their whole life, that they should 'live out their faith in their jobs and in their community'. He also states that for church members, an integral part of their plans for the church must include a desire to serve the community.

The second way in which Archbishop Carey refers to community is by referring to the church itself as a community (Carey, 1995: 79). The church as a whole and individual congregations constitute communities of faith and healing. In this sense the Church of England itself is a community and also part of a wider, broader community.

In *The Church and the Market Place* Archbishop Carey uses the word community in ways that are consistent with its use in Christian writings. (Davies, D. et al. 1991: 103) Although community may be one 'of the most overworked terms in the Christian vocabulary' (Scherer, J. 1972: 13), Carey uses the word in two specific and related ways. The Archbishop's use of the two conceptions of community implies and assumes certain qualities about community. He implies that community is interconnected with various values that make a relationship between the church and the community a desirable objective. His reminder that church members are also members of a secular community, and his recommendation that they have a duty to serve the community in which they live and work, as well as the church in which they worship, indicates that he believes that participation in the community in some way complements and enriches their lives.

The values Archbishop Carey associates with community are positive. He identifies the broader Christian church and individual congregations as communities, he believes there is merit in engagement in communities and he believes in the desirability of faith communities.

The twin assumption that community is associated with certain values and these values are desirable was evident in the interviews and the results from the questionnaires. In both sources two related trends on the subject of community were highlighted. The first was that all core and non-core members valued the ideal of community. The concept of community was always talked about as a positive thing, and the existence of a community was always considered a desirable and enviable state. The second trend was that all members from both congregations repeatedly associated certain values with community. Where communities existed they presumed that certain relationships, codes of behaviour and norms also existed. Members of both congregations both valued community and associated a certain values to it.

A positive community

When I wrote my questionnaire I included several questions related to the idea of community. I hoped to discover not only whether members considered their church a community but also what type of relationships they associated with community. In the questionnaires I asked members to say what was the most important reason they continued to attend their church. The majority (63%) ticked the option 'Because this church is a part of the community in which I live and feel as though I belong to'. Nearly two thirds of members believed that their church was in the community, that they were a part of this community and lastly that this was an important factor in their decision to remain members of a church.

Throughout the interviews members indicated in a variety of ways that they believed that community was an important and positive idea. One of the most obvious ways in which members showed their attachment to the idea was by their frequent use of the word. For members from both congregations the words community and congregation were almost interchangeable. Core members especially were prone to use the phrase 'In our community....' to refer to the congregation.

A second indicator of the value that core members placed on community was the fact that many members claimed to have moved from church to church specifically because they were searching for a church that was also a community. In the part of the interview recorded below, the Makay family explained how their choice of church was influenced by their unwillingness to worship in a church with no community.

The Makays were confirmed as adults with their teenage son. They lived just beyond the parish boundaries and were some of the youngest people to regularly attend St Sebastian's. They started attending church with their son at his school in the period leading to his confirmation and

as a result were confirmed themselves. The son attended church as part of his weekly timetable at school and through his interest, his parents had also become interested. The school chaplain welcomed them into his congregation but he urged them to find and join a community (congregation) of their own. In the interview the Makays described their trepidation at having to leave the school church and find another congregation which suited them.

The first church they visited was their local parish church. They chose this church precisely because it was local; they had taken the chaplain's recommendation that they join their own community literally and assumed that their nearest church would constitute their community. They attended this new church for a couple of weeks before deciding it 'wasn't really our type of community' because although 'they were very nice but if we'd gone there we would have lowered the average age of the congregation by about 40 years'. They explained why they decided to leave this church:

> J: And it became a little bit difficult. The vicar there was against women priests, he'd asked the parishioners to vote on it. They voted against women but he resigned anyway....and we thought "is this really for us and did we want to be involved in what was an awkward and difficult situation?"
>
> S: And there's no community spirit.
>
> J: Yes, this is an area of executives and everyone goes of to work and so nobody sees anyone.
>
> LR: What do you mean there's no community spirit?
>
> S: The reason there's no sense of community is because I mean if they go to the shop the shop is so far away it's another world.
>
> J: It's very much a bunch of individuals who happen to live in geographical proximity to each other, that's what the church was like, that's what this estate is like. It's not what you would call a community.

Members of St Martin's told similar stories about their search for a church with a suitable community. One story was repeated several times in interviews and appeared to be well known among the congregation even when members did not know the people involved. Members often told me that they knew of other churches in the area, which had no community and described how they or people they knew had left those churches to attend St Martin's because of its community. In many interviews the following story was recited as an example of a church without community. The often-repeated story involved a young woman with two small children. During the service the youngest child began to cry and the woman was approached by the vicar

and asked to go to the back of the church. The child continued to cry and the vicar approached her again, and this time asked her to take her child outside and wait in the porch until the child stopped crying. I eventually interviewed the woman in question and she explained what happened to her and her views on community and the church:

> R: Consequently I went back in, grabbed my two year-old left that church and never set foot in it again. That hurt me a lot. I wrote to the Bishop and he did go and see [the vicar]. He came round to see me a couple of weeks later with flowers and said I must appreciate how he felt. Then my parents started going to St Martin's, so I went there, because I needed to go somewhere.
>
> LR: I've heard your story a few times. Are you aware that so many other know about it?
>
> R: What upset me most was that by throwing me out like that he was saying that I wasn't a part of the community at that church. He was a new vicar, he then, afterwards, had family services to encourage families to come to church although I don't necessarily think that's the best way. You need to feel welcomed at a church not as though you're doing the vicar a favour by turning up on a Sunday morning.

Although Ruby's story is extreme many members in the interviews reiterated the high premium placed on community. Leaving congregations because they felt that there was a lack of community was a frequently cited as an example of just how important community was to them.

Members from both congregations believed that their current churches were communities (see chapter on A Belief in Belonging). It is possible that in explaining why they left their previous church or why they had not been regular church members before now they were attributing the lack of community retrospectively. However we know from other investigations that church members value community whether they believe it is present in their present church or not,[1] and that for many it is reason enough to leave or to reject a church that it has a poor reputation as a community.

The perceived lack of community at other churches or within other denominations was cited by several members as the reason why they would not choose to worship in any other church apart from their own. Some members travelled past several other churches to reach there own. I asked them why they didn't worship at these nearer churches. The most usual reply was that the nearer churches were not their type of communities. They explained that the idea of attending a local parish church was not feasible in an age when church communities were so different from one another.

In the interviews the values associated with community were at once assumed and explicitly articulated. In the section of the questionnaire designed to assess members' perceptions of their

own membership, I asked two questions that related to their sense of belonging to their church. Taken in conjunction with information provided in the interviews the replies to these two questions provided more insights into the value which members placed on the idea of community.

In the questionnaire I asked if there were any reasons they would consider leaving their church. Two and a half per cent chose 'Loss of faith' and 14% chose 'Family or work commitments' as reasons for leaving their church. The majority of church members ticked the 'Other' option and in the space where I asked them if they could identify a reason why they would leave their church most members wrote 'No'. If the questionnaire results were taken on their own they would indicate that member's commitment to their church was so firm that they could conceive of no reason why they would stop attending church.

The inability of members to conceive of a situation where they did not attend church was reinforced by their response to the question 'If for some reason your church was shut down would you join another church?'. Only 1 1/2 % said 'No' and 17% indicated that their attendance would depend on how far away the church was. This meant that 81% believed that in the eventuality of their own church closing they 'would immediately find another church in their area'.

In the interviews it became clear that members would indeed immediately try to find another church to attend if they no longer attended their present church. The data produced in the interviews confirmed the information generated through the questionnaires. However the information given in the interviews did not confirm the responses to the question about the possible reasons that would stop them attending church.

In the questionnaire the majority of members said they could think of no reason why they would stop attending church, yet in the interviews many members told me they had left churches because there was no community at that church. Ruby and the Makays were just two examples of the many who had attended a number of churches before they arrived at their present church because they wanted to worship at a church with community. The lack of community at a church was generally accepted as a reasonable and accepted reason for leaving a congregation. Members who had not themselves left a church for this reason spoke sympathetically about other members who had been 'forced' to leave because there was no 'community spirit' or because there was no community at a particular church. The value of community was such that while members could not imagine a loss of faith or work commitments as legitimate reasons for leaving the church the absence of community was considered a reasonable justification for leaving church.

The values associated with community

Members believed that community was a positive quality in itself, they also believed that it was a quality they desired in a church or congregation. It was also evident that they associated certain values with community. In some discussions of community there is an attempt to differentiate between the views people have of community, which are descriptive and those which see community in normative terms. Leading British social scientist, Anthony Cohen notes that whatever anthropologists or sociologists say about community other people are capable of maintaining a dualistic interpretation of community (Cohen, A. 1989: 8). This was certainly true of the members I interviewed. The word community was evoked as an ideal and as a description of a particular entity, often the two meanings were intertwined and members obviously did not differentiate between them.

When the idea of community was evoked it appeared as though members were also assuming that a range of values was naturally associated with it. In the interviews a variety of different values and qualities were attributed to the idea of community but there were several values, features and attributes that were repeated enough times to constitute a consensus among both congregations. The consensus of values around the idea of community was not surprising or unexpected. Within the sociological discussion of community and in the popular understanding of community there is a tendency to associate certain qualities and types of relationships with the existence of community.

Warm and supportive

When members spoke about the values associated with community, the feeling they most often evoked were that communities were warm and that they were supportive. Although 'warm' or 'supportive' are ambiguous words in the context of community it was when members were using them in this sense that their description of community most resembled Tonnies definition of community or Gemeinschaft. The typology that Tonnies introduced in Gemeinschaft and Gesellscaft (first published in 1887) is still a part of the sociological discussion on community although there is no sociological consensus as to his exact significance (Cohen, A. 1989: 22). Although there is no consensus as to the value of Tonnies typology in investigating modern communities (Bell, C. and Newby, H. 1971: 16), it is worth examining his typology because of its association with the values that were identified by members from both congregations.

Tonnies distinguished between two major types of human society, Gemeinschaft; the community and Gesellchaft; the association. Each is characterised by different types of relationships and each type is associated with particular geographical and economic environments. The typology works on two levels. The first level is descriptive. He argues that there are a 'great variety of ties which involve an individual through different types of relationships'. His purpose was to develop a typology of these ties (Tonnies, F. 1955: 8). Tonnies distinguishes between the two types of social interaction and participation thus: Gemeinschaft, includes family ties, intimacy and friendship ties; Gelleschaft, is characterised by

self-interest, economic interests and political and contractual considerations (Tonnies, F. 1955: 261).

Although the typology that Tonnies developed works on many levels, (Loomis, C. in Tonnies, F. 1955: xii) the level which is most relevant to the discussion of community, as perceived by the members of St Martin's and St Sebastian's is the descriptive. That is members consistently described their idea of community in terms similar to these used by Tonnies. The relationships, values and lifestyles they described when they spoke about community were similar to those employed by Tonnies in his work.

Tonnies argued that in order to grasp the nuances and sophistication of his typology it is not enough to equate Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft with the concepts of community and associations although he does admit that the terms do roughly correspond on the descriptive level (Tonnies, F. 1955: 6). Other investigations into the nature of social ties within communities have assumed that Tonnies types are synonymous with community and association.[2] More significantly the types have also become synonymous with particular values.

In the sociological and popular imagination the two types of social group identified by Tonnies in his typology, the community and the association have become linked to rural and industrial environments (Laslett, P. 1965: 55). Tonnies believed that Gemeinschaft societies were intrinsically beneficial to man while Gesellscaft societies diminish the quality of man's relationships. While the Gemeinschaft community was 'invested with a warm loving aura', Gesellschaft society was depicted as having a sinister and alienating effect on its members (Bernard, J. 1973: 92). Although there is evidence that many Gemeinschaft-type communities are cold hostile places,[3] and that in many urban centres individuals live in closely formed and supportive networks,[4] the descriptive element of Tonnies analogy remains a powerful factor in the public evaluation of rural and city life. Despite the fluid nature of both rural and urban areas, and the fact that neither are static but dynamic (Robinson, G. 1995: 39), the characterisation of the rural idyll and the urban wasteland persists (Duncan, O. 1956: 1).

The association between Gemeinschaft and rural, supportive neighbourhoods remains an integral part of the contemporary vision of community. Village life, where individuals and families know each other intimately is for many commentators still linked to warm, intimate relationships and a high quality of life.

In their evaluation of community life and the relationships associated with community other writers have tempered their praise. However there has been a distinct trend within sociology to display a 'Nostalgia for the old and disgust for the new' (Gusfield, J. 1975:5). In their evaluation of the major trends in community studies, Bell and Newby note that the sociological discussion of community was frequently coloured by a 'pervading posture of nostalgia' (Bell, C. Newby, H. 1971:22). The tendency to imbue the ideal of community with sentiments and

relationships that are associated with a past golden age is highlighted by Jacqueline Scherer in *Contemporary Community Sociological Illusion or Reality?* She argues that the 'word community is emotionally tinged' and that that the modern values associated with the condition of community are projected back into the past (Scherer, J. 1972: xii).

In his work on the significance of community Anthony Cohen argues that community is not a nostalgic term. He believes that if we look at the way the term community is actually used we can see that it is something more than a nostalgic concept but one which has a very modern meaning. For Cohen there is no point in trying to define the term and contributing to the already vast number of existing definitions.[5] Instead Cohen concentrates on analysing the symbolic meaning of community and claims that 'the community itself and everything within it, conceptual as well as material, has a symbolic dimension' (Cohen, A. 1989: 19).

The most symbolic element of community is that it expresses a relational idea in terms of boundaries. That is, Cohen believes that individuals use the idea of community to define their understanding of the way they live and their understanding of the social: 'The symbols of community are mental constructs: they provide people with the means to make meaning.' (Cohen, A. 1989:19)

Cohen suggests that his interpretation of the significance of the meaning of community stands apart from the sociological tradition of understanding community as a nostalgic ideal. He believes that the embrace of the nostalgic ideal of community is not only fuelled by a desire for the past and a fear of the present. Rather community is a mechanism which allows individuals to literally construct their lives with new meanings and new boundaries. Not only does the idea of community tell them who they are, it tells them who they are not, who their neighbours are and where they belong.

However in practice there is less difference between Cohen's understanding of the way individuals use the concept of community and the perception of community as a nostalgic term than there appears to be. Their similarity lies in the relationship between the values attributed to community and the significance those values for people's lives. Whether individuals see community as a nostalgic ideal, a phenomenon imbued with qualities and sensibilities they associate with the past, or as symbolic the result is the same. The values linked to community, warmth, rural peace, meaningful relationships, etc, are so appealing that people are willing to organise their lives around them.

The attribution of bygone traditions and values to community may indicate the power of nostalgia over the individuals or academics that celebrate community. However nostalgia itself does not detract from the fact that the identification of positive values with community is an influential factor in the way people organise and perceive their lives. To say that individuals' idealisation of community is merely a nostalgic yearning on their part does not diminish its

power or make it less real than a material process working in the lives of people. Community may not be a tangible phenomenon but its impact does have a tangible impact on lives and relationships (Crow, G. and Allan, G. 1994: 193).

In *Communities in Action,* Steveryn Bruyn argues that the concept of community is so attractive that not only do people continually seek to belong to a community but that it has become 'one of those great words like "love" or "truth"' (Bruyn, S. 1963:169). Bruyn is suggesting that the ideal of community is so powerful that people's lives are affected by its pull. Other commentators have noted that there is evidence that people have actually reorganised their lives to make community living, or what they perceive as community living, a possibility.

The process of 'counterurbanisation' was first noted in America when it was recognised that the rural population was growing for the first time in a hundred years. From its inception as an area of study, counterurbanisation has always been associated 'with contemporary ideas of a shift from an industrial to a postindustrial society' (Champion, A. 1989: 1). In *Counterurbanisation,* the authors note that there is a spectacular move of business and more importantly households from the city to the countryside. R Perry led a team of researchers in a series of international case studies into counterurbanisation. They conclude that although there are different explanations for why households move out of the city there are several factors that are consistent across all case studies. The first is that migrant flows are composed of mostly the middle class and the middle aged. Those with capital, education and marketable skills are more able to move, while 'the less skilled have to stay at home' (Ed. Perry, R. 1986: 14).

The second trend they note is that when the middle class, middle-aged migrants arrive in their new homes the first thing they do is attempt to recreate the community institutions and traditions they associate with village or rural life. Although Perry et al were unsure whether the migration to the countryside really represented the adoption of values associated with rural living, it was clear that once they had relocated the migrants embraced the activities and lifestyles of community living (Perry, R. 1986:15).

The ideal of community exercises a powerful attraction. Not only is community bound up with particular values but also both values and community are interwoven with symbolic and nostalgic meaning. The power of that meaning is implied in the attempt of families and individuals to recreate the environment and relationships they associate with community.

Tight-knit and personal

Communities were never described as small, members of St Martin's often boasted about the size of their congregation, but they were always described as 'tight-knit', 'close', or 'personal' A community was not defined by its size but by the type and quality of relationships within it. Similarly, these adjectives did not imply that everyone knew everyone else intimately. Core-

members were adamant that their church as a community was not a 'social club', they were often keen to distance themselves from the idea that the church was a collection of friendship groups. Even at St Sebastian's it was not the case that every member of the congregation knew everyone else.

From the data produced by the questionnaires it was also evident that significant numbers of both congregations socialised with people outside their congregations and that many of them valued their non-church friends. Nearly half (46%) said that most of their friends had contact with a church, and 90% said that some or most of their friends had contact with a church. Over half (55%) said they felt that it was fairly or very important that their friends understood their religious beliefs, but 42% said, in answer to the question 'How important is it to you that close friends understand and share your religious beliefs?' that it was 'Not at all important'.

When members described communities as 'personal' or 'tight knit' they were not referring to groups that were characterised by personal intimacy or social ties. Instead they seemed to be referring to groups that were personal in that most members of the group knew a great deal about each other. They were intimate in that they knew personal information about other members of the group, but this was not an intimacy that was necessarily partnered with friendship or social ties going beyond simple acquaintance.

When I asked members to explain what they meant, they explained that in a community people looked after each other and had a responsibility towards each other regardless of whether they were friends or acquaintances. The key feature or value of community in this instance was not the warmth of the friendships, but the sense of obligation that members felt towards each other by virtue of their membership of the same community.

Jean described how she believed that community was tight-knit and personal. In her mid-forties and with two older teenage children, Jean was a housewife who was very keen to stress that membership of a church was not merely a social affair, the pastime of a bored housewife whose children were about to leave home. In the past Jean had been a member of a Baptist church. The Baptist church was friendly, most people knew each other but Jean left because she wanted to be part of a community. I asked her in what way the Baptist church was not a community:

> J: I went to the Baptist church because I knew people there. But I was becoming more and more dissatisfied with the Baptists, I felt it time to give another church a try.
> LR: Can I ask you why you were dissatisfied with the Baptists?
> J: I never really felt part of it - obviously some of that was my fault. It was becoming much more evangelical which I didn't like. It was becoming more extreme, with extreme views, views that I found hard, that I disagreed with. I didn't feel as though the people

there cared about each other, they were more concerned with the their views than about the actual people in the church. It wasn't really a community in the same way it is at Sebastian's.

When members described community they assumed that one of its positive attributes was that a community was a place where you would be cared for and where also you would have an obligation to care for others. Like many other church members,[6] the responsibility of caring for others and of being cared for in return was one Jean associated with community in general, and her vision of a church community in particular. A part of this care was knowledge about other people's lives, sometimes in intimate detail but it didn't necessarily mean you were intimate with them.

They repeatedly made the point that a community is welcoming, friendly and warm. They believed that a community was a guarantor of 'real' relationships. People could depend upon each other and they were given the opportunity to build lasting relationships with one another. These relationships were 'real' and of a different character to the relationships people maintained outside a community. A community provided the time and the space for people to come together, and allowed them to forge and maintain relationships in an amenable environment.

In their investigation into the character of the church in rural England, Davies et al discuss the nature of congregations in the light of Toennies distinction between community and association. They draw attention to the distinction that some writers make between churches that are communal and those, which are associational.[7] However they stress that in practice the 'community - association model is of limited importance' (Davies, D. et al. 1991:110) because once it is applied to actual churches the model becomes unworkable. In his study of two churches Clark found that it was possible to divide participants into two groups, locals and cosmopolitans. Although both groups participated regularly in the life of the church they were involved in different types of relationships (Clark, D. 1971: 142). Churches it seems are rarely communal or associational in character, they are more likely to be a combination of both.

This would seem to be the case with the congregations of St Sebastian's and St Martin's. There were Gemeinschaft-like relationships (comradely, brotherly, friendly) and Gesellscaft-like relationships (contractual, authoritative, rational) in both congregations. Although Tonnies noted that both kinds of relationships could be found in a single organisation, he believed that each individual 'social collective' was driven by circumstances which favoured one type of relationship over another (Tonnies, F. 1955: 254).

Other writers have identified further methodological reasons for the inadequacies of Toennies model in examining particular churches.[8] However the qualities associated with Tonnies typology are useful in looking at the perceptions of both congregations in one important respect.

The majority of the members I interviewed believed that many of the qualities Tonnies associated with Gemeinschaft were applicable to community in general and to their church community in particular. They assumed that the qualities and lifestyles that Tonnies identified with Gemeinschaft were an integral part of community and played an important part in the their thinking about the value of community. They believed that generally the relationships within their congregations were more substantial than those they found outside their churches.

That members continually distinguished between congregations that were communities and those which were not and identified certain qualities with communities, relates to the findings of Davies et al on this subject. In their research they found that the distinction between Gemeinschaft and Gesellscaft contexts played a part in the way priests thought of various parishes and the way they related to their parishes.[9] Other studies have also found that the celebration of the values and characteristics that Tonnies associated with Gemeinschaft is evident among groups of a diverse nature[10].

The association between certain values and the quality of personal relationships was apparent in interviews with members of both congregations. This association emerged in members' criticisms both of the nature of Catholic worship and of the local Cathedral congregation.

In the interviews I discovered that some members had worshipped at the Cathedral in the past, attended the Cathedral for special events or knew people who worshipped there. As a cross-section of both congregations, members with some familiarity with the Cathedral (even if that knowledge was secondhand) thought that the quality of relationships and the experience of worship there was inferior to the conditions in their own church.

They often referred to the Cathedral as a 'cold' place, which was 'very grand' but which had 'no atmosphere' and was really only suited to people 'who liked that sort of thing'. One woman said that she thought the Cathedral was the kind of place you went to worship if you just wanted to worship alone rather than 'worship with people who mean something to you'. The congregation at the Cathedral was alternatively depicted as composed of individuals who valued the architecture of the Cathedral over the quality of the human relationships; or as loners who enjoyed the impersonal nature of Cathedral worship; or as people who liked other people to know 'that we worship at the Cathedral'.

Members presumed that the type of relationships they associated with the existence of community did not exist between the members of the Cathedral congregation. None of the members I interviewed had worshipped at the Cathedral for a sustained period of time and most had never attended an ordinary Sunday service. Their views about the lack of community at the Cathedral, and particularly their assertion of the lack of warmth and feeling in the relationships among worshippers at the Cathedral could only have been based on hearsay or conjecture. Although the perception of members who talked about the Cathedral was based on conjecture

this fact does not diminish their firm belief that the values they attributed to community were important.

Some members I interviewed expressed similar views about the nature of Catholic worship as they did about worship at the Cathedral. When I interviewed Peter and Jackie they outlined their beliefs about the difference between Catholic and Anglican worship. We started talking about this subject after I asked them how important the church and the people in the church were to their lives. They had attended many local churches in the 30 years they had lived in the area and believed they spoke with authority and knowledge about the different styles of worship in different churches:

> P: Oh very important. Most of our friends are drawn from Christians. Our life would be incredibly impoverished.
> J: One thing about the Anglican Church is that we're very good at getting together socially and supporting each other.
> LR: Is that just true of the Anglican Church?
> P: I always feel we're a better church at being busy and getting things done in the Anglican Church, rather than the Catholic Church, maybe they're a bit more spiritual than we are.
> J: Some Anglican churches you go to don't seem to have any form of togetherness any more and others have too much.
> LR: What do you mean by togetherness?
> J: People coming together when they go to church. One of the nice things about the Church of England is that it embraces all sorts - all 6 churches in Whitstable are very different, that's partly because people like to go to the church that they like with people they like. People who are like them. That doesn't always happen in other churches.
> P: No, I don't think it happens in the Catholic Church. I think that because they are more spiritual there's less togetherness they don't go for the togetherness; it's more strict about being a Catholic.

The lack of warm, friendly relationships in Catholic congregations was cited as an example of why Catholic congregations lacked community or 'togetherness'. As with the Cathedral, members who described the Catholic Church had no substantial experience of Catholic worship.[11] However there was a general perception of Catholic congregations as gatherings of individuals who probably didn't know each other and who only came together to worship on a Sunday morning and then left again.

Community and relationships

The qualities members associated with community were universally positive yet as the interviews continued it was clear that many members' experience of the communities in which

they worshipped was not wholly positive. They may identify warm, friendly and mutually supportive relationships with the existence of community but they themselves were not always recipients of warm, friendly relationships in their congregations.

During the interviews it became clear that just as community was an ideal, the values members associated with relationships in the community were also idealised. Some members had many unhappy relationships in their congregation. In the chapter on 'The Significance of Commitment' I talked about several people who felt neglected by fellow worshippers or who believed they were discriminated against or unappreciated. Yet even these people insisted that their community was characterised by warm, supportive relationships.

At one very important level there seemed to be a contradiction between the conventional sociological understanding of community and the community as it was experienced by some members. It seemed as though there was a tension between the values members attributed to community, their experience of community and the sociological understanding of the relationships that comprise a community.

An attempt to conclusively define the sociological understanding of community would be an endless and possibly unrewarding task, (Bell, H and Newby, H. 1971: 27) but there have been two consistent themes in the many definitions of community. One is that community is increasingly identified as existing beyond the boundaries of time and space (Sanders, I. 1966: 5). Community is no longer associated with place as it was in the classical sociological tradition. Rather community can now be applied to any group or collective that defines itself as a community, that is the definition of community is often subjectively defined. As Ellias concludes in his introduction to *The Sociology of Community,* the definition of community is so broad and ambiguous that any group in society can be a community:

> It can be applied to neighbourhood groups, to groups of hippies, to religious or ethnic minorities, to student communities and to many other types of grouping, even within the metropolitan cities. (Bell and Newby, 1971: XV)

The second persistent strand within sociological thinking on community is that although community is no longer restricted and defined by place (Scherer, J. 1972: 13), communities are still associated with rewarding human relationships. Wherever communities are discovered or sought there are valuable human relationships and strong social bonds. Where there are no valuable human relationships, where social bonds are severed and there is no sense of worth or belonging, then sociologists invariably conclude that there is no community (Gusfield, 1975: 100).

The identification of interactive and positive relationships as the founding blocs of community persists in many areas of sociology. From the discovery by the Chicago School of interlocking

and mutually dependent relationships in inner-city areas to the famous American studies of Middletown and Levitown in the twenties and sixties the quality of interpersonal relationships has been used as a mechanism to judge the existence and quality of community.[12]

The difference between the sociological understanding of community, and some member's experience of relationships within their congregations was puzzling. All of the members I interviewed valued the idea of community, but according to some their personal experience of community had been far from warm or supportive. Some members had been very open about their feelings of rejection or exclusion by other members in their congregation. My own observation that some members were not actually participating in the kind of warm, supportive relationships they associated with the existence of community was reinforced by my interviews with the vicars of both congregations.

I asked one vicar why he believed that the idea of community was so important to his congregation. He laughed and said it was because they liked to 'think of themselves as an independent unit, a community'. He went on to explain that in reality they were not the community they thought they were:

> They think, really that they don't need me, but I don't know if you've noticed but they're really several groups rather than a single community. I wouldn't say that they are groups in conflict, but that they circle around each other.

The vicar was equally amused by the idea that they regularly participated in the community, especially when I gave examples of some of the groups outside the church that members had said they were involved with. He believed that many of them 'may have gone once or twice' but that regular participation was 'not really what I would call it'. He stressed that he didn't believe that members were lying to me about their involvement in the community, but rather that they were 'probably trying to prove a point'. He also refuted the claim that his church was a part of the community to the extent suggested by members. The vicar described a series of established relationships between his church and various other bodies including the hospital and local charities but, he argued, these were part of the routine life of the church, relationships which had been established decades ago and which hardly constituted 'going out into the community'.

When I asked him why he thought members of his church did not 'go out into the community' he immediately answered 'because they're scared'. He believed that even the most confident of his members was nervous about evangelism because they believed 'they had to stand on a street corner with people gawking at them because they're Christians' and they didn't understand that there are 'many ways to bear witness'. This particular vicar thought there was a link between members' unwillingness to engage in the community and their fear of evangelism. However a related point was that his interpretation of his congregation's involvement in the community differed significantly from theirs. There was no doubt that core-members participated in the

community more that most other groups but it seemed as though they were idealizing their involvement to some extent.

The vicar of the other church gave a more somber answer to my question of why the ideal of community was so important to the members of his church. He first questioned the idea that community, other than the ideal of the church, as the community of Christ was important to the members. He thought it was more likely that every person comes to church for a different reason and that it is impossible to know why. Of all the interviews I conducted in the course of my research, this particular interview was personally the most difficult because I was in receipt of so much information concerning the vicar and his relationship with his congregation. I was also aware of the possibility that the vicar himself was one source of the tensions between different groups in the congregation.[13] In the course of interviews with members from this church it was clear that many were unhappy with the vicar and they believed that he was not suitable for their church.[14] However the vicar also made it clear that he was aware of these tensions, and of the groups in the congregation who did not support him.

When I asked him if he thought that the congregation was a community he said no. He felt that there were a 'very few' members who took responsibilities in the church seriously but that mostly 'they have a very particular experience of the life of the church'. Unlike the first vicar who believed that his congregation desired to be a community even if they were not, the second vicar doubted whether his congregation saw a community as an ideal.

I asked him why he thought members of his church used the word community. He said it was a word that could mean different things and they might be using it in a context that I was unaware of. I asked him if he could give me an example, but he said no. One area where he agreed with the first vicar was in his judgement of the extent to which members of his church were involved in the community outside the church. He too said that the involvement was not as extensive as they imagined because 'the church being the type of church it is already has an extensive outreach which many of our members are involved in as a matter of course'.

Although my findings appeared to contradict the second vicar's perception of his congregation it did seem to be the case that community was treasured as an ideal more than it was actually lived. The wider sociological discourse on commitment and religion has identified the tension between member's identification with a particular group or organisation and their sometimes negative experience in the group. We know that membership of a group is never static, that members continually assess and reassess both their membership of the group and the value which they place in membership (Moreland, R. et al. 1993: 166). We also know that members of a group may construct an identity for them selves that is focused on an ideal (in this case the virtue of the community) rather than the experience of the group in question (Castells, M. 1997: 7).

However it is still unclear why members should value community, while sustaining a commitment to it that often contradicts their own definition of what a community should be. I was able to talk to some members about why this should be and I realised that one source of the contradiction was my own preconception with this issue. I was assuming that members would experience the tension between their idealisation of community and their personal experience as a contradiction. Yet for most members, while there was a tension that was obviously distressing to them, they did not associate this with the value of community to them, nor did it devalue community in their eyes.

Members valued community but more significantly they valued the opportunity it afforded them to participate. The desire on the part of many members to find a church with a community was more easily explained in this context. Their commitment to the church was clearly a commitment to a church with a community. Many of them had demonstrated that they had no commitment to a church which did not fulfil their criteria, and that their criteria were based on their belief as to whether this was a church in which they could become involved. Their commitment to the church was a very particular commitment; it was a commitment to a church that embodied their ideal of community.

In some cases their dissatisfaction with their congregations appeared to enhance, rather than detract from the esteem in which they held community. Their commitment and membership of this chosen community was a virtue that they were proud to adhere to. Just as many members believed that the difficulties they faced in sustaining their commitment to the church made that commitment more valuable (see chapter on the Significance of Commitment), so the difficulties some members experienced in becoming a part of their congregation enhanced the value they attributed to it. In fact the very desire to belong to a community was understood as a virtue just as individualism was understood to be a mistaken ambition.

Ultimately the desire to participate in a community and be a part of the type of relationships they described was stronger than the tensions they experienced as part of these communities. In one particular interview, as the woman described how unhappy she was at the church, I wondered why she had not left to worship elsewhere. Her present church was not her local church yet she insisted on maintaining a series of relationships with people she believed despised her. This woman's desire to worship in a community was stronger than her discomfort at worshipping with people with whom she had few friendships let alone warm and supportive relationships.

The desire to belong to a community was one of the defining elements of the personal relationships within the communities generally. In the way that members described their relationships with other people in the congregation it seemed as though they were associational and communal at the same time. In descriptive terms they were communal, they were warm, friendly and comradely. They appear as the types of relationships Tonnies associated with

Gemeinschaft society. The bonds between people are personal and supportive and involve trust and dependency. (Tonnies, F. 1955: 8) However there is a major difference between the relationships members believed characterised community and the relationships typical of Gemeinscaft.

Gemeinschaft relationships are not entered into consciously, they are the natural product of a certain type of human organisation. (Lomas, P, in Tonnies, F. 1955: xii) The tight-knit and personal relationships that members believed they enjoyed in their congregations were part of a community that members consciosly decided to join. They joined their communities precisely because they were seeking a specific type of relationship. In this sense the drive or motivational force that characterised the relationships was associational. They were entered into rationally and for a specific reason, that reason was to enjoy a specific type of relationship and to take the opportunity to participate and belong.

The high value church members placed on participation in their community has been well documented in other research. In his analysis of the nature of country parishes, Anthony Russel described how newcomers to a village were always surprised and shocked by the lack of participation among long-term residents (Russell, A. 1986: 103). Others have found that the reality of rural or village life is so different from its popular image that 'city folk have often found the countryside positively dystopian' (Bell, D. 1997: 91). Similarly Scherer notes that members who consider their churches to be communities want to be a part not of a community of place but a community of relationships (Scherer, J. 1972: 13). In their study of church attendance Davies et al note that one of the most 'striking' results from their data was the relationship between church attendance and the length of time people had lived in the parish. They found that 'the group who have always lived in the parish has the highest proportion (76%) of non-attenders' and that 'a high proportion of those who had lived in the parish for 10 years or less also did not attend church'. They concluded:

> In other words, it is those who have moved into the parish, and been resident for 11 years or more who are most likely to be church attendees. (Davies, D. et al, 1991: 214)

Davies et al suggest that parish members become more involved after a period of time because by then middle class incomers have had time to settle down and become members. However parish members who have lived in the parish all their lives have no interest in participation and do not value the idea of community. Unlike their newly arrived neighbours who do not think of community in the same way, established members of the parish remain uninvolved in the church.

In relation to the way people become involved in the life of the church I found a comparable trend in the time between members joining the church and becoming involved in extra activities. I had assumed that members would join a church and then gradually become more involved over

a period of time. Instead I found a pattern that suggested members either became involved very quickly after joining or they remained as non-core members. It seemed as though involvement in the community initiated a process whereby their membership of that community was quickly 'institutionalised' [15] so that even if members felt that they were unappreciated or even disliked by others in the group they still felt secure in their membership of the community.

Core-members recognised this pattern and both wardens described how they, along with other core-members would encourage newcomers to become involved as quickly as possible. They noted that the new members who became involved did so after a very short period of time. It appears as though members who wanted to participate already had some conception of the value of participation and of the community they were to be a part off.

It seems as though members have an idea of community and what it means to belong to a community before that membership is a reality or firmly established. This was certainly true in the case of those members who persisted in their membership of a church where they did not enjoy supportive relationships and in the case of the vast majority of core members who became involved in the church rapidly after first joining. In both cases the value members attributed to community was to some extent already a part of the way in which they viewed the world.

As can be seen from the discussion in the following chapter, the value of community as a virtue is reinforced both by their perception of a society where community is scarce but also by the values they associate with the absence of community.

Conclusion

The value of community was an important factor in church members' relationship with their church. The majority of members valued the community they felt they experienced within their church and many believed that desire for community or the lack of community were important factors in the choice of a church.

Members from both congregations linked certain values with the existence of community. They thought that communities were good, and that to live in a community was desirable because of the increased quality of life and the moral virtues they associated with it. They associated certain values to community, friendliness and loyalty; communities were also supportive and warm. Members believed that communities were worth joining because facilitated a certain type of relationship that they valued. Communities encourage and sustain meaningful relationships and encourage a sense of belonging and togetherness and are morally desirable even when the experience of members seems to contradict these beliefs.

Just as members associated certain values with community they also associated certain values with the absence of community. In the course of the interviews it became apparent for many

members there was a relationship between certain values and the absence of community. Community not only implied that certain values were desirable and present but the absence of community also implied that other values were dominant.

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[1] In his survey of a Catholic parish in Liverpool, Ward found that 25% of the people he surveyed regretted there was no parish club at weekends and there was a general regret that there was no 'community spirit' at the church (Ward, C.1965: 46). When he looked at the reasons for non participation amongst parish members, the most commonly given reason was that the church was full of cliques and that ridding the church of the cliques would induce people to go to church (Ward, C. 1965: 86).

[2] In *The Sociology of Community* Bernard notes that even though other sociologists including Durkheim have insisted that Gemeinschaft and Gesellscaft are not translatable into comparable English terminology... 'when all the modifications, circumstances, exceptions and qualifications are duly noted' (Bernard, J.1973: 91), Gemeinschaft refers to close knit neighbourhoods and Gesellscaft to associations of interest.

[3] Russell argues that far from encouraging, intimate and familiar relationships village life often encourages formality. The very claustrophobia and forced intimacy can foster a developed and pronounced sense of privacy (Russell, A. 1986: 103).

[4] There is a great deal of sociological research that suggests that the characterisation of urban areas as sterile and devoid of sustained relationships and any sense of community is false. Although some suburban and industrial areas are prone to social fragmentation (Gusfield, J. 1975: 87), there are studies, which suggest that, the type of warm, supportive relationships exist in the urban context. These were characteristic of the Chicago school of community studies. Although many of the findings of the Chicago school have been discredited (Savage, M. and Warde, A. 1993: 7), it is not the case that community is restricted to rural locations. The pioneering American sociologist Herbert Gans coined the term 'urban villages' to refer these urban areas.

[5] In the introduction to *The Symbolic Construction of Community* Cohen draws attention to the fact that as early as the mid 1950s 'an enterprising American sociologist had uncovered more that 90 discrete definitions of the term in use within the social sciences' (Cohen, A. 1989: 7).

[6] In his investigation into the motivations for church attendance in America Robert Monaghan found that many of the members identified themselves as having lifestyles associated with 'small community living' and that they considered their community to be tightknit. They also expect their church to mirror their expectations in this area (Monaghan, R. 1967: 237).

[7] They draw attention to the work of Anthony Russel. He concludes that that many rural churches are not really communal but more like sects (Davies, D. et al 1991: 108).

[8] In *The Social Construction of Communities* Gerald Sutles discusses the desire of Americans to recreate small community life styles. He argues that although some commentators associate this

desire with the type of Gemeinschaft living identified with Tonnies, in reality the phenomenon of consciously recreating a small rural community is actually the opposite of what Tonnies was referring to in his work on the subject. For Tonnies a key feature of Gemeinschaft type societies is that they are not constructed consciously by the people living in them (Suttles, G. 1972: 265).

[9] When they surveyed priests and asked them about their perception of their relationship to their parishes they discovered that there were roughly three types of responses, each determined by whether they saw their duties defined by the needs of the parish, congregation or a combination of both. Davies et al believe that this division is influenced by whether the priest has an associational or community-shaped understanding of the church and its relationship to society.

[10] In his research into working class relationships in Chicago, William Kornblum found that the desire for community and the attempt to recreate and protect certain values and relationships characterised by community existed among all the groups he investigated (Kornblum, W. 1974:4).

[11] Ironically Hornsby-Smith argues that as an ideal, the concept of community is 'highly regarded among Catholics'. This reinforces the probability that church members were merely voicing a prejudice or out-of-date view about the nature of Catholic worship (Hornrsby-Smith, M. 1989: 66). Ward's study of a Catholic parish did indicate that Catholic congregations were more associational than communal but his research is 30 years old where as Hornby-Smiths is more extensive and more recent.

[12] In 1928 Robert and Helen Lynd published their study of Middletown, now known as a Muncie in Indiana. The aim of the study was to observe as many layers of social interaction as possible. *Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture* became a classic sociological survey of American culture and community. They concluded that Middletown was a community because it was a place where the strong bonds between groups and individuals was clearly evident. Although they discovered that traditional Christian values had been eroded to some extent by industrialisation, they believed that as a community it remained in tact.

By contrast, in his study of Levittown, a mass-produced housing estate in Pennsylvania, the American sociologists Gans concluded that although many of the institutions associated with community existed, a community did not. He identified the absence of any community spirit, the desire to belong or participate as primary reasons for the absence of community. Gans infamously described the motivation of Levittowners for moving to Levittown as a search 'not for neighbours, but a private garden' (Gans, H. 1967: 149).

[13] Probably the most recent in-depth analysis of the role of the vicar and sources of conflict in congregations is Penny Beckers's *Congregations in Conflict: Cultural Models of Local Religious Life*. Becker argues that one of the major sources of tensions in congregations is the tendency for different groups to form in support of or against a new vicar. Often the vicar is unaware of these groups and acts more as a symbol of the desires or grudges of the congregation rather than as an instigator or participant in the conflict. (Becker, P. 1999).

[14] Member's views of the role of their vicars is discussed in greater detail in the chapter ' A Belief in Belonging'.

[15] Richard Jenkins, Professor of Sociology at the University of Sheffield argues that the identity of belonging to a particular institution is often the 'emergent products' of what people do. When a number of people share the same experience of identity and that identity is shaped through habit and practice, then that identity quickly becomes institutionalised. That is it becomes a 'taken for granted feature of the social landscape' (Jenkins, R. 1996: 128).

Chapter 7

The Destruction of Community

What we are seeing today is the more general and diffused poverty of the spirit, a society increasingly lacking at the heart at all levels, especially the governmental, the ghost of what was once, at least, a partially civilised (better, Coleridge's 'cultivated society') being succeeded by a morally maimed society. (Hoggart, R. 1995; 328)

The value with which members held the idea of community can be partially explained by the values they associate with the existence of community; the percieved quality of life, a familiar environment and the reward of mutually supportive relationships. However the value that members place on community can only be partly understood by analysing the positive qualities they associate with community.

An essential component of members' desire to be a part of community is their antipathy to the values and conditions they associate with the absence of community. Not only does their distaste and even horror of living without community enhance their commitment to community but their very idealisation of community is informed by the negative and destructive conditions they believe flourish without community.

The central theme of this chapter is the impact of the perceived absence of community on the value members imbue community with generally and their commitment to a particular community, that is their congregation. It begins with an analysis of the origins of the values and conditions that are associated with the absence of community and then examines the precise attributes and qualities members associate with the absence of community. The second half of the chapter investigates members' belief that community has been destroyed by certain values and looks at the relationship between their fear of its further destruction and their idealisation of community.

The absence of community

Just as there is a shared conception of the values associated with the presence of community, so within sociology and the popular imagination there is a shared sense of the values associated with the lack of community (Misztal, B, 96: 38). The perceived impact on modern society of the collapse of community will be discussed in more detail in the chapter 'A Belief in Belonging'. But it is important to note that the contemporary fear of 'the self-centred and excessive individualism that undermines the commitment to something beyond the self' (James, A. 2000: 24) is an established theme in the discussion of society without community. The longevity of this trend, the persistence with which ideas about the absence of community have endured can partly be explained by the conditions in which the first ideas about community evolved and the

peculiarities of the contemporary discussion on community.[1] The evolution of the concept of community and the values and relationships linked to the absence of community are intimately linked.

In *The Sociological Tradition* R. Nisbet argues that the foundations of sociological thinking consist of a series of unit ideas. For Nisbet the concept of community is not merely one of sociology's building blocs, it is the 'most fundamental and far-reaching of sociology's unit ideas' (Nisbet, R. 1966: 47).

Nisbet attributes this crucial role to the idea of community because he believes that it was through their conceptualising of community that the intellectuals of the early nineteenth century developed their ideas about the nature of society and the place of the individual within it. Before the earliest sociologists considered community man had never been conceived 'in his wholeness rather than in one or another of his roles'. That is man had only ever been perceived as a part of his function, that is he was only ever the role he was in his work, never a full human being. At the same time community became the 'means of denoting legitimacy in associations as diverse as state, church, trade unions, revolutionary movement, profession, and co-operative' (Nisbet, R. 1966: 47). Community was the prism through which the emerging society conceived itself.

There is another factor, which contributes to the significance of community as the pivotal unit-idea of sociology. Nisbet argues that the first sociological formulations of community were inherently conservative. They were conservative because they formed part of a reaction against the Enlightenment hostility towards the communal relationships of feudalism. (Hawthorn, G. 1976: 123) The first sociological writings on community were shaped by hostility towards the emerging post-feudal societies. The weight of the nineteenth-century intellectual climate formed a backdrop to this hostility.[2] Writers who feared the unknown of the new modern world constantly mourned the demise of the old world.

While many observers regretted the lost traditions of the past for their own sake, it was the daunting prospect of a society unfettered by communal ties that underlay many of these writers concerns (Edwards, D. 1969: 61). From Disraeli's lament that 'modern society acknowledges no neighbour' to Burke's accusation that the ambition of modern social reformers was to 'tear asunder the bonds of the subordinate community' (Nisbet, R. 1966: 50), nineteenth-century doubts about the future society often focused on its apparent lack of community.[3]

The sociologist Joseph Gusfield describes this period as an 'era acutely aware of the future' (Gusfileld, J. 1975: 3). More specifically it was an era whose inhabitants were aware of a future without the traditional ties and bonds that had held society together in the past. They were 'sensitive to living in the ruins of an old social order amid the envisioned outlines of a new one beyond the horizon' (Gusfield, J.: 975: 30). Gusfield's point that at the beginning of the

nineteenth century the new society was anticipated, but as yet still hidden beyond the horizon is an important one.

The ambiguous nature of the new social order encouraged some writers to anticipate the new world with both fear and optimism. In the interregnum between the demise of one society and the evolution of nineteenth-century industrial society it was not immediately obvious to many thinkers that the dislocation of old forms of association and the emergence of new forms of relationships between individuals was inevitably a negative or destructive development.

Most of the writers associated with the classical school of sociology[4] articulated a sense of anticipation and trepidation towards the process of industrialisation in their work. Some of these writers were writing as society was changing before them. As such their analysis of those changes matured and developed as the world around them also matured and developed. The progression of ideas within Durkhiem's writings is an example of how the perception of community in relation to industrial society evolved. More significantly Durkheim's works gives us an insight into the process by which the absence of community was associated with particular values and relationships.

The Division of Labour in Society was first published in 1893 and it is the clearest expression of Durkheim's expectation that belonging and participation would continue to develop in an industrial society. He is concerned to show that industrial society at once destroys previous forms of community and creates the potential for new forms of community. In *The Division of Labour in Society* he describes the diminished ability of the family to enforce a sense of belonging and transmit the norms and rules of behaviour in society (Durkheim, E. 1964: 16). He notes that at the same time all forms of 'moral and religious regulation' have waned and that the social phenomenon underlying what he terms as solidary, have all been undermined by rapid social change (Durkheim, E. 1964: 408).

However for Durkheim these changes do not inevitably herald the end of solidary and association within society. In his early writings he prophesised neither the fragmentation of society nor the growth of anomie.[5] He argues that as moral and religious regulation wanes economic regulation has waxed. The increased division of labour within society produces new relationships between men including new systems of rights, duties and obligations that are reinforced by law and new rules. Durkheim believed that new forms of community were growing in the wake of the old. He also believed that the forces of industrialisation were actually creating the conditions in which bonds between individuals and groups would grow. That is industrialisation was facilitating a far greater degree of solidary than that which existed in the past.

The increased division of labour within society meant that new opportunities for solidary were created, eventually solidary would exist in all areas of life (Bell and Newby, 1971: 23). Not only

would society become more communal than in the past, but also its impact on the social life of man would be to his advantage. Durkheim believed that as individual relations became more specialised, as a result of the increased division of labour, an organic solidary would allow the whole individual to be integrated into society. In the past solidary was of a mechanical character, that is where solidary existed it was founded on likeness, family, locality, etc. This form of solidary excluded dissimilarity because it was incapable of tolerating difference. In contrast the process of organic solidary was not constrained by finite boundaries and could therefore engage the whole human (Cohen, A. 1994: 22).

Although Durkheim was worried that morality and traditions were not evolving as quickly as the material changes in society, the tone of *The Division of Labour in Society* is optimistic. However by the end of the nineteenth century Durkheim no longer believed that new forms of solidary would evolve spontaneously throughout society. Where he had once prophesised the development of an organic form of community, one that would be an integral part of industrialised society, by the time he wrote *Suicide* in 1897 he had abandoned this theory.[6]

In *Suicide,* and in other writings at this time, Durkheim consciously revised his earlier views on the possibility of community within society.[7] Where as his earlier work was characterised by optimism his later work was characterised by his doubts about the future of society (Gusfield, J. 1975: 16). Where as he once anticipated the growth of community, he now suspected that industrial society was incapable of generating new forms of community. He believed that if the collective nature of society were to be maintained man would have to intervene in his world to introduce the structures and organisations that would make solidary a possibility.

The concern over the quality and nature of solidary in society unites *The Division of Labour in Society* and *Suicide.* Suicide is an investigation into the phenomenon of suicide as it occurs within specific groups within society. It is also an indication of the future that awaits society without adequate provision for communal relationships.

Durkheim's final conclusion is devoid of even a glimmer of the optimism in his earlier work. He draws a direct relationship between his 'obsession' with the 'crisis of modern society...social disintegration, the weakness of the ties binding the individual to the group' (Aaron, R. 1989: 35) and the prevalence of suicide in certain groups, especially those groups with the least solidary. The weakness of communal ties, the tendency towards social fragmentation, the phenomena of suicide within certain groups were all related to the inability of industrialised society to create the bonds that would hold it together.

In his later works, especially *Suicide,* Durkheim articulates his belief in the relationship between negative social forces and phenomena and the absence of community in modern society. In *The Social Division of Labour* he welcomed the breakdown of old forms of community because they released the potential for a new type of community, organic solidary. Towards the end of his

career he reassessed the ability of modern society to create organic solidary spontaneously and was forced to conclude that modern society was incapable of maintaining the bonds that tied men together. Finally Durkheim makes two significant conclusions about the relationship between community and industrial society. First, Durkheim associates negative values and fragmented, destructive relationships to the absence of community in modern society. Secondly, he assumed that modern society was incapable of establishing enduring and effective communal ties and bonds; the new society that Durkheim once expressed so much confidence in was now in crisis because of the lack of community.

Durkheim's analysis of community is significant for several reasons. The body of his work provides an insight into the progression of his views on community. He never doubts that community is a positive and essential quality of any society. The greatest evolution in his ideas is in the possibility of industrial society creating that community. His initial belief that modern society could do this and his final pessimistic conclusion that it could not echoes a wider sense in society that there was a crisis. (Rex, J. !969: 131) Not only does he establish an association between negative values and the absence of community, but also his association became part of a tradition of viewing the absence of community and the values and social problems connected to it.

The rational community

In many respects Weber's contribution to the development of the idea of community in sociological thinking is less ambiguous than Durkheim's. At the heart of Weber's work is the same concern with the prevalence of individualism and the fear of social fragmentation in society that informed Durkheim's writings. Although his ideas matured and developed in the course of his productive life, key themes and a distinctive outlook especially in relation to the impact of industrial capitalism on Europe are a consistent part of his work (Runciman, W. 1982: 3). Unlike Durkheim, Weber's doubts about the ability of capitalism to reverse or neutralise the trend towards fragmentation and alienation are more pronounced and are integral to the core of his analysis (Campbell, T. 1981: 185).

Durkheim's final pessimistic conclusions were far from a foregone conclusion. By contrast Weber locates the tendency towards rationalisation as a potentially destructive force within society. Although Weber identifies characteristics of capitalist society which he admires, the general tone of his critique concentrates on destructive and alienating trends within society.[8]

Weber's earliest methodology is centred on the investigation of social forces in a systematic and scientific manner. As such he placed great emphasis on the development of conceptual schemes that could be used as a frame of reference in which to examine facts and particular phenomena. The schemes would allow the material from a variety of sources to be compared and for the sociologist to make generalisations about the nature of society and the place of man within it.[9] In

relation to the discussion on the values and relationships associated with the absence of community, the most significant areas of Weber's work were his ideas on the rationalisation of society.

Weber was concerned with the level of alienation in society and the lack of meaning in many lives. He believed this was a product of rationalisation. He thought that the 'forward drive of rationalisation seemed irreversible and meant a degradation of the quality life' (Hughes, J. and Martin, P. et al. 1996: 120). To understand properly the significance of rationalisation for Weber it is necessary to understand his theory of social action.

Weber believed that society was composed of a variety of social relationships, which could only be understood if the subjective aspects of interpersonal activities were also understood. This means that for Weber the nature and meaning of human societies can only be comprehended if we can understand the different types of human action (Campbell, T. 1989:169). Using the schema of ideal types[10] to investigate the plethora of human activity, Weber isolated four ideal types of human action, one of which was rational conduct. This particular mode of behaviour involves the individual calculating and choosing a goal or orientation through rational means (Weber, M. 1964: 115). Weber believed that capitalist society was characterised by the rational form of human activity. In his introduction to Weber's work Giddens notes that the desire for wealth is not the significant feature of Weber's views on the distinctiveness of human behaviour under capitalism. Rather its unique feature is 'rational organisation of free labour...the continual accumulation of wealth for its own sake, rather than for the material rewards it can serve to bring' (Giddens, A. 1978: 3).

The prevalence of the rational form of behaviour in capitalism is important because its domination over other forms of behaviour leads to the rationalisation of every aspect of society. This in turn leads to a qualitative shift in the character and quality of human relationships. Not only is it more likely to generate social relationships which are associative rather than communal,[11] but the rationalisation of society leads to the fragmentation of social life, a process which Weber 'deplored' because of its negative impact on society (Campbell, T. 1981: 186).

Ultimately Durkheim and Weber attriubte negative values to the absence of community in modern society. Although their methodology is different, as is the progression of ideas within their work, they share the same conclusions about the difference between relationships in a community and relationships forged outside a community. In effect the distinction they make between communal relationships and those relationships, which are based on rationality, contract or economic interest is the same distinction that Tonnies makes in his works (Gusfield, J. 1975: 10). That is, a society in which community is absent is a society in which the potential for bonds is never realised, and one where human relationships are shallow and degraded.

Rationality, individualism and materialism

In the interviews the discussion of the values and relationships associated with the absence of community arose in a number of different circumstances. Members often spoke about their views on the absence of community as part of a conversation on community generally. Discussions of this nature were usually general and descriptive. However members also spoke about the absence of community in relation to its impact on particular individuals, often spouses or their children. They also spoke about the absence of community in relation to the decline of the influence of the church and the decline in its membership. These later discussions usually generated more substantial discussions about member's views on the absence of community.

It became obvious very quickly that just as they associated certain values to the existence of community they also attributed certain values to its absence. There was a general assumption among core members that people who did not go to church lived outside a community and that this was a lesser form of existence. Lives lived outside a community (congregation) were lacking in some way: their relationships were uncertain, their goals and ambitions were superficial or confused or their confidence as individuals was more likely to be undermined by the trials of everyday life.

One of the most common ways in which the lives of people outside a community were discussed was when members expressed amazement at how people outside a church survived in times of crisis. One older couple told me about a period in their lives when the husband was very ill for over a year. The couple were constantly in hospital, constantly living in doubt about their future and constantly preoccupied with the fear of a lingering death for the husband. The woman claimed that she only survived the ordeal because of the church. She described how the first night she stayed in hospital with her husband she expected to lay awake for hours worrying and fretting over her husband's health. Instead, she found herself physically buoyed up by the prayers of the people in her church, she told me that the prayers of the people in her congregation were a physical presence in the room with her. She was convinced that people who live outside a community are incapable of coping in the way that she was able to. She wondered how they survived without the support of a community and the knowledge that that they were not suffering alone.

A woman whose daughter committed suicide gave another example of how members viewed the problems associated with the absence of community. Emma's daughter committed suicide when she was 22. She was training to be a lawyer and Emma and her husband knew that something was wrong with their daughter's life: she was unable to communicate, she was withdrawn and she was hostile to their attempts to help her. Like the woman mentioned above Emma began talking about the absence of community when she was describing how she had coped in the two years following her daughter's death. She described their visit to a bereavement group and their

shock at meeting other people whose family members had committed suicide but who did not belong to a church and who in their eyes had to cope alone.

Emma also believed that if her daughter had been a member of a church she would not have committed suicide. She thought that the pressures on young people were extreme, that the stigma attached to failure was too high, and that the hostility towards people who were seen not to be coping was instrumental in driving her daughter to her death. More significantly she thought that membership of a church would have protected her daughter from these pressures. She believed that the community she found in her congregation offered her support and reinforced her confidence. The world outside her community destroyed her daughter because there are no support systems and it constantly undermined her daughter's will to live.

Although Emma's example is extreme, core members often spoke about the world outside their churches in very negative and emotional terms. The harshness of the world, its coldness, its hostility, its excessive demands on individuals to play certain roles were the shared perceptions of many core members. Even those members whose view of society was less pessimistic believed that the lack of community diminished the quality of life. One of the ways this was expressed was in relation to the lives of non-church members who appeared to be happy but in the opinion of church members were not.

In her mid forties, with an adult daughter and two younger children Nola was one of the most confident members I interviewed. Like many core members not only was she articulate but she was very open and prepared to discuss her views on everything from the performance of the vicar to the spiritual health of other members. Nola was a core member who I had heard about from other people before I met her. Other members described her as 'very committed', 'really very spiritual' and as someone who took her religion very seriously. Nola considered her faith to be very firm. In the interview she made several references to how strong her faith was and said at one point that 'I can honestly say that my faith is as strong as it has ever been and that I don't believe there is anything that could shake it'. Nola's husband was not a church member. According to Nola he was not interested in religion and although he had met members of Nola's church socially he did not want to join.

I asked Nola if her relationship with her husband was affected by her membership of the church. She answered by explaining that she felt that her husband desired something that she gained from her membership of the church, even if he did so only at a subconscious level. She believed that although her husband's life was a good one, at a level he was unable to recognise his life lacked something. I asked her if he minded the amount of time she spent at the church or resented her emotional commitment to something outside their marriage:

> N: He doesn't object because he's met many people at the church and he admits that they have something that people outside the church don't have. They have something extra

> special, he knows they have something that a lot of people are looking for these days and he respects that.
>
> LR: What is it that people outside the church don't have?
>
> N: There are lots of things they don't have, things they probably want or need. Some of them are probably already looking but they're often too prejudiced to look at the church. At an instinctive level people know they need something more than just being happy, like I said they know there's something missing but they don't know what it is.

Other members also spoke about their belief that people who lived outside a community lived happy but essentially unstructured or meaningless lives. Nola described the effect of living without a community on her husband as though it were disorienting for him, creating a vacuum that that he was aware of but unsure of how to rectify. Other members also identified a sense of disorientation as a major consequence of living without community.

Sheila's daughter was a member of her church until she left home to go to university. When she came home for the holidays, Tanya no longer wanted to accompany her mother to church. Sheila said there were no arguments and that she respected her daughter's decision not to attend church. Sheila was not surprised and hoped that at some time in future, possibly when Tanya had children of her own, that she would renew her membership of a church. The aspect of Tanya's non-attendance at church that concerned Sheila the most was the fact that Tanya refused to become involved in various church social activities.

Tanya enjoyed amateur dramatics and had once joined in the staging of a Christmas play at the church. Although she had enjoyed her involvement on that occasion, she had since refused to help. She told her mother that she felt it was unfair that she should enjoy the company of church members without participating in worship at the church. Sheila was worried that her daughter was unable to enjoy the social activity of the church. She felt that Tanya's unwillingness to participate in further church social activities was a sign of a more profound inability to 'join in':

> She's a very moral person and I know that all kinds of things on the news upset her. She's bright and she thinks about things a lot. I know she has friends but I worry that she's like a lot of young people, it's not true that they're all selfish and self-centred. Tanya's not, but it's true they don't want to get involved.

Other members spoke about their concern that young people; especially their adult children were not involved in any wider activity outside of work, family or social lives. They often said it 'was a shame' or that 'it seems such a waste', and they implied that they thought that such lives were empty or without meaning. A common theme in this discussion was that there was nothing for young people to do even if they were inclined to participate in groups or bodies outside the church.

Members explained that individualism was so prevalent in society that many people felt embarrassed or awkward about participating even where the opportunity presented itself. Members from both congregations drew my attention to the efforts the church made locally and nationally to involve people, but that time and time again people resisted the invitation to join in. They felt that one reason for this was that the church was one of the few bodies which still offered people opportunities to become involved in or to join a community. If other groups apart from the church assumed the responsibility of providing opportunities for people to participate then it would appear to be a more normal activity.

Members of St Martin's were proud of the number and variety of groups they organised, groups that were open for all the 'community' to join. They were also puzzled and slightly resentful that they made the effort to provide their community with a service but that the community ignored them. They continually stressed that the public was under no obligation to worship at their church just because they made the youth club or the mother and toddlers group available to them but that the public insisted in believing that church members just wanted to 'convert them'.

One example of this was the effort of many members of St Martin's, as part of the Whitstable team ministry, to establish a mothers and toddlers group in a new church near a local council estate. Members of the church volunteered their time and expertise so that women from the estate could meet other women and relax. Very few women from the estate used the facility. Members explained that they believed that the women were afraid of them and suspected them of ulterior motives. The whole project was often used as an example of how individualism not only destroyed community but also sometimes acted as a barrier to its renewal.

The values members associated with the absence of community were an amalgamation of the values (or lack of values) that are popularly associated with modern society. Selfishness, individualism, materialism and alienation were all cited as features of life outside a community. Throughout the interviews it became clear that members not only associated certain values with the absence of community but they believed these values were instrumental in the destruction of community. Members assumed that the prevalence of these values over they values they associated with their own communities was responsible for absence of community throughout the rest of society. Core members attributed one further role to the values they associated with the absence of community; they believed that these values were responsible for the decline in church membership and the influence of the church in society.

The destruction of community

The decline of one society and the rise of another are themes that form a central part of the early sociological tradition's approach to community. The early sociologists were concerned with the values and relationships associated with different types of communities and associations (Robertson, R. 1970: 7). Like the core members I interviewed they understood the relationship

between the earlier and later societies as wholly destructive. The social scientist Misztal argues that not only does the classical sociological tradition place the Gemeinschaft/Gesellscaft distinction at the heart of its thinking on community but that it contributed to the popular perception of modern society as a negative force on the quality of individual lives. She believes that Tonnies especially is responsible for creating an image of modern society that is 'destructive of the human spirit and man's potential for happiness' (Misztal, B. 1996: 38).

Within this early sociological tradition particular values were associated with the smaller, intimate communities of pre-industrialised society and the impersonal, larger associations of capitalism itself. However sociologists discussed these values and their relationship to different societies in a particular context. Unlike the members I interviewed they believed that it was not the values of individualism, materialism or rationality themselves that destroyed the old communities. Rather society itself was a source of power, it was the material transition from one society to another that brought about the change in values and relationships (Hill, M. 1973: 261). It was not that the values themselves caused the change from one form of human organisation to another but that the change in society that caused values to change.

In the opening to his work on the nature of values in modernity, Poole notes that it 'is hard to overestimate the importance of the eighteenth-century genesis of modern conceptions of social life'. He believes their writings were to become so influential precisely because they perceived themselves to be writing at a time when a 'fundamentally new kind of society was coming into existence in Western Europe' (Poole, R. 1991: 1). Scherer also notes that the real transformation of societies was the dynamic behind much of their work. Their experience and perception of change in the world around them informed and shaped their analysis (Scherer, J. 1972: 4). Nisbet argues that the impact of the French and industrial revolutions was so profound that 'the great shift in the nature of society' was a key factor in the development of their thinking on community (Nisbet, R. 1964: 99).

Chronologically Tonnies development of the Gemeinschaft/Gesellscaft typology predates any major work on the subject by Durkheim or Weber. Despite its early publication Tonnies work exhibits none of the ambiguities articulated by Durkheim and Weber towards the potential of capitalism to create new communities. Not only is Tonnies consistent in his belief that any new modes of participation and association formed by capitalism were inferior to previous forms of society, but he insists that it is the breakdown of the old communities that allowed capitalism to develop in the first place.

For Tonnies it is the loss of community that causes the conditions that facilitate the growth of capitalism. The central causal status that Tonnies attributes to community is the pivotal factor both in Tonnies' theory of community generally and in his development of a typology of community. Both Gemeinschaft and Gesellscaft are not merely descriptive terms but are dynamic concepts. Nisbet insists that a complete understanding of Gesellscaft must recognise it

not only as an ideal type or a static description but also as a process (Nisbet, R. 1964: 75). Gelleschaft does not refer to an established form of human association. Rather it refers to the forces that first cause those associations to form and which then cause the weakening of the bonds between individuals and which therefore impoverish their relationships.

Tonnies believed that at the heart of Geseslleschaft was the growth of rational will (Tonnies, F. 1964: 17). It is rational will that encourages individuals to form bonds of a particular nature, to pursue goals that focus loyalties and ambitions outside their immediate family or neighbourhood. He contrasts rational will with natural will. Natural will is spontaneous, instinctive and emotional:

> the businessman, scientist, person of authority, and the upper classes are relatively more conditioned by rational will than the peasant, the artist and the common people who are more conditioned by natural will, and men and older people by rational will. (Tonnies, F. 1964: xvi)

The differences between rational and natural will also have consequences for the strength of social ties within those societies. The impersonal nature and high levels of mistrust in Gesellschaft societies means that the bonds are fragile. When the bonds are placed under stress they disintegrate and fragment. It is the weakness of the bonds, which facilitates the trend in industrial society to withdraw, to minimise their involvement with others, to cease to interact and to participate reluctantly and begrudgingly.

Tonnies believed that the forces that shaped the two types of community were strong throughout society. He rejected the idea that either type of association was created and maintained through willpower alone. Individual desires and personal wills were insignificant factors in the forging of social bonds of either Gemeinschaft or Gesellschaft types. (Tonnies, F. 1955: 17)

Tonnies' use of the term *will* to denote the different forces that shape Gemeinschaft or Gesellschaft should not be confused with the modern use of the word in relation to will power. There is nothing personal about Tonnies' conception of these forces. In so far as they influence men's relationships with each other they are conceived as impersonal forces. Tonnies was not referring to the individual power of a single will. In the context that Tonnies uses them the word, will, refers to a force within society that acts independently of the desires of individuals.[12]

Even in Gesellschaft, a type of association that Tonnies characterises as shaped by greed, and self-interest, the driving force is not the selfish desire of individuals. The dynamic towards Gesellschaft occurs because Gemeinschaft itself fails to meet people's needs so that they are forced to engage in free activity and thereby set in motion the forces that fragment Gemeinschaft and allow the growth of Gesellschaft. The values he associates with community can not be recreated because the society of which they were a part has gone.

The work of Weber and Durkheim reflects a similar approach to the origins of the values both writers attribute to community and association.

A reading of Weber does suggest that he rejected the notion that individuals could determine the course of history. Weber did not believe that an individual or even a collection of individuals could reverse the trend towards rationalisation in capitalism merely because they willed it. Like Tonnies, Weber's pessimism about the future of community was partly informed by the realisation that the trend towards the destruction of values and relationships associated with community could not be reversed.

Despite Weber's belief that the will of individuals could not change history he did believe that values were in part the creation of individual consciousness. However Weber's emphasis on the role of identity in society does not mean he believed that men could consciously change history. The reverse was true. Weber believed that the very process of rationalisation prohibited the growth of a collective consciousness that could influence society. Turner and Factor believe that Weber's analysis suggests that the existence of community is impossible because of rationality:

> Weber's conception of the possibilities of rational enquiry denied the possibility of any genuine truth about values, apart from the irrefutable principles of 'logic' that comprise his theory of values and entail his methodology. Because these principles also entail his denial of the Platonic idea of a rational good or moral truth, Weber had to deny the possibility of a community or of lives being founded upon such a truth. (Turner, S. and Factor, R. 1984: 96)

Weber has been accused of identifying ideas as the causal force in the history of human society. If this were true it would suggest that Weber believed that the ideas and relationships that he associates with different types of human society could exist independently of the society in question. R.H. Tawney has discussed Weber's approach to the role of ideas in social change on several occasions, most notably in his introduction to the 1965 edition of Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* and in his own *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*. In both instances Tawney acknowledges his debt to Weber and commends Weber for his scholarship. However the thrust of Tawney's critique is that Weber's argument is 'one-sided and overstrained' in certain areas. Tawney makes several criticisms of Weber's theory but in both instances he argues that Weber gives too much weight to 'moral and intellectual influences' in the rise of capitalism. Tawney concludes that 'both the capitalist spirit and the Protestant ethics...were a good deal more complex than Weber seems to imply' (Tawny, R. H. 1969: 312).

Some writers have argued that Weber's work on the relationship between values and society suggests a more sophisticated model of the link between the two.[13] Others have contrasted

Weber with Marx noting that while Marx was a materialist who believed that ideas are rooted in society, Weber is an idealist who believes that it is ideas which move society. Giddens refutes this interpretation of Weber. He argues that while Weber was critical of Marx, they shared the assumption that the dynamic of industrial society was imbedded at the most fundamental level of society (Intro to Weber, M. 1978: 3). Raymond Aron also notes that critics confuse Weber's methodology with his conclusions. In his discussion of Weber's work, Aron argues that the core of Weber's methodology was an attempt to grasp the power of the subjective in society. Weber's use of the ideal type is misleading because some critics believe the ideal type is how Weber actually views the world. According to Aron such critics do not realise that the ideal type is merely an 'instrument of comprehension' and that ultimately it is 'a means rather than an end' (Aron, R. 1989: 249).

Weber's materialism has no significant impact on his conception of the possibility of community within capitalism. For Weber the salient point is that rationalisation is an irreversible force which has a tangible impact on the way men perceive and organise their lives. As such it can not be reversed by the will of men or changed by the actions of individuals.[14]

Nisbet argues that Weber's analysis of the destruction of community shares several features with Tonnies. Not only did Weber value the communal ethic and despair at its demise in modern society; he attributed its destruction to a process within society. Nisbet believes that Gesellschaft and the process of rationalisation are 'strikingly alike' (Nisbet, R. 1965: 79). As a process running through society, rationalisation, like Gesellschaft does not allow for exceptions. Not only is it an integral part of society but its continual destruction of the communal ethos is an almost inevitable trend.

Like Tonnies and Weber, Durkheim was conscious of writing at a time of great social change. He too believed that the great social changes he was witness too were accompanied by a corresponding development of values and relationships. In relation to his analysis of community and its destruction Durkheim identified the transformation of community as a key element in the overall transformation of society (Scherer, J. 1972: 4). The change from mechanical to organic solidary was the basis for the growth of the intellectual and moral crisis that Durkheim identifies in the conclusion to *The Division of Labour in Society.*[15]

Unlike Weber there is no real ambiguity in Durkheim's work about the role of ideas or the individual as a basis for the destruction of community in industrial society. Madge talks of 'Durkheim's stubborn exclusion of the role of the individual' in relation to the development of values and culture in society (Madge, J. 1967: 66). Throughout his work he stressed the fundamental power of society itself to change the way men lived their lives. The destruction of community is only ever understood as a consequence of the inability of capitalism to generate the basis for enduring bonds between people.

Although the three sociologists discussed in this chapter approach the issue of community from different perspectives they share more than a belief in the positive values associated with the existence of community. Informing their work is a preoccupation with the nature of change in social organisms. Cohen argues that their work was 'frequently based on the contrast between two apparently historical disjunctive types of society' (Cohen, A. 1989: 22). Not only did they associate negative values to the absence of community, but they also ground those values within the fabric of the new society itself.

The destruction of community and the church

In some respects the views of core members on the destruction of community were a reflection of the ideas associated with the classical sociological tradition. Members associated the same values to the existence of community as did Tonnies, Durkheim and Weber. Members associated the same type of relationships and values to the absence of community as is usually described in classical sociological thinking.

Essentially the perception of community and its absence articulated by core members of both congregations was identical to the traditional description established in the Gesellscaft/Gemeinschaft typology. Communities, especially the community of the church, were associated with warm, positive qualities. Living without communities was considered undesirable because the quality of human relationships was inferior to relationships sustained within communities. Individuals who lived without communities were susceptible to emotional crisis and distress. They were more inward looking, their lives were less meaningful and they were more dissatisfied as human beings.

Despite the similarities between the sociological conception of community and the idea of community as it was expressed by members there were also significant areas of difference. The early sociologists emphasised the context in which they saw the destruction of community taking place. They believed that the destruction of one form of community and the evolution of associations was a part of the process by which one form of society was replacing another. The values they associated with communities were the values of a bygone society. All three of the sociologists discussed here believed that the values they associated with either community or association were organically linked to the societies in question. A fundamental part of their critique was the belief that the positive values they associated with the existence of community could not be spontaneously recreated in industrial society.

Core members from both congregations not only associated certain values with the absence of community, they believed that these values were responsible for the breakdown of community itself. They thought that the particular relationships they associated with the absence of community and the values of individualism and materialism were the cause of the breakdown of community in society. Core members thought that more people would live in communities if

they rejected the values of individualism and materialism and were more willing to become engaged in society. They assumed that individuals could choose to live in communities if they wished to and that communities could be regenerated if groups or individuals desired it.

The classical sociologists presumed a relationship between the physical existence of community and the positive values they believed flowed from it. A central feature of their critique of the negative values they associated with the absence of community was their belief that those values were an inherent part of modern society. The idea that those values could be eradicated through the personal desires of individuals would have been preposterous. Members' conception of the nature of community and especially the relationship between community and particular values was radically different.

Most members conceived of a world where two different sets of relationships and organisations coexisted. They believed that there were still communities in society, collections of families and individuals who sustained close, intimate relationships, were supportive and felt a sense of obligation towards each other. They also believed that these communities existed within a broader environment where there was no community. Although they recognised that the absence of community was the norm they felt that it was possible for communities to exist in certain circumstances.

Members talked about the absence of community and the values they believed were responsible for its destruction in the context of declining church membership. There was a common perception that the values they associated with the absence of community were responsible both for the general decline of the church, and for their own friends and family leaving the church.

Materialism and selfishness were two qualities that members frequently associated with the absence of community. They were also qualities that were blamed for destroying the foundations of community. Several members from both congregations had sent their children to board at public schools. In these cases none of the children had continued to attend church as adults. Even though they attended church daily at school, as soon as they were allowed to, they stopped attending.

The parents of the children in question blamed the public school ethos for undermining their children's will to go to church, and for introducing new values that the parents believed were negative. Eric and Susan were bitter and dismayed at the impact they thought public school had had on their children. Eric said he regretted sending his two sons to public school because it had taught them to value a career and success above all else. Eric and his wife held themselves responsible for what they called the 'shallow emptiness' of their son's life. They felt that their own desire to give their sons the best start in life had resulted in their sons deciding to leave the church community.

> Our eldest two were at public school, and although public school should be better, in fact they have chapel every day, the eldest was always very materialistic, and really I think the school encouraged it. I don't know if that's a result of drifting away from Christianity or if it's a cause. I don't know. In fact the other two at grammar school are more in the community, and therefore they get caught up in the young people's fellowship. They're definitely not as selfish, well they can't be, but the other two, unfortunately their selfishness has been encouraged.

Some members spoke very bitterly about the values they believed were destroying their children's lives and undermining their communities. Ernie and Mavis blamed the prevalence of materialism in society for the decline in church membership. They explained that the demands of modern society condoned a way of life that was sinful and destructive of community values. They believed that materialism was such a powerful force in society that even people who were not sinful found it difficult to resist the general trend towards materialism.

> LR: Why do you think church attendance has declined?
> M: I think it's greed. Money matters a lot these days, it's an era we're going through.
> LR: What about the era?
> M: Sin is coming in more and people are not realising it. Things are mattering more to them which should not. Their outlook on life is distorted.
> E: You've got to bear in mind – say in our church a large proportion of the people are elderly and young people are caught up with keeping their jobs, earning money, working six days a week. Sunday comes along and they want to spend it with their families and go supermarket shopping and so the church really doesn't get a look in.

In the eyes of many core members selfishness and materialism were linked. Selfishness encouraged people to become materialistic and materialism encouraged selfishness. Members believed these qualities destroyed community because they damaged the ties that held communities together. Communities presumed a level of trust and sympathy among it members. Interviewees stressed that members of community didn't have to be friends with everyone else but mutual respect among members was necessary.

Selfishness and materialism were always spoken of as undesirable qualities, which could be rejected in the right circumstances. Although most members believed that society encouraged these qualities, they also believed that individuals could reject them if they wanted. When members talked about their children they often expressed the hope that their children would change when they had children of their own or when their grandchildren were grown up. People could change if they wanted to, if they couldn't then they needed help or guidance. Selfish and materialistic people were often described as lonely and deserving of sympathy even if the people in question didn't realise how lonely their materialism and selfishness was going to make them.

Rationality and individualism

Members always spoke about materialism as a negative quality. In the eyes of the church members I interviewed it was a quality with no redeeming features. Conversely their attitudes towards individualism and rationality were more ambiguous. They were still identified as values that destroyed community but members sometimes admitted that they could also be positive qualities in the right circumstances. In the interviews it became obvious that one of those circumstances was marriage to a non-church member.

About a third of the members I spoke to were married to a non-church member. I normally asked if this affected their relationship or their commitment to the church in any way. Some members explained that their partners stayed away from church because they were the 'rational one in the relationship'. The description of rationality was an imprecise term. It referred to different qualities depending on the interviewee. However it was most commonly used to describe people who felt no need to belong to a church. In this context rationality was a form of benign individualism. In interviews where members were speaking about their spouses rationality was never spoken of with the same contempt that members spoke of the selfish individualism that they linked to materialism. Yet it was spoken of as a form of arrogance, a kind of conceit on the part of the spouse in question, that they thought they could live outside a community.

The destructive element of rationality was less obvious than that of materialism but no less powerful. Members described their concern at their children's perception of a family where one parent went to church and another stayed at home on a Sunday morning. They thought that the independence of one parent gave a 'false impression' about the advantages of belonging to a community. Children could easily conclude that one could lead a life that reached its potential without living as part of a community. Several members in this position believed that their relationships with partners who didn't go to church were possible because each one brought something different to the relationship. They were concerned that their children didn't appreciate that it needed at least one member of a family who was part of a community to ensure its emotional and spiritual health.

Members admitted that they were conscious of the impact partners who did not attend church had on their relationship to the rest of the community. Their children were less likely to maintain their membership of the church to adolescence. If one partner of a couple was not a member of a church it was more likely that their friends would not be church members, and as a couple that they would spend less time with other members of the congregation. The fact that one of a couple was not a member of the congregation was in itself perceived as detraction from the community.

Even where individuals were sympathetic to their partners commitment to the church (as they invariably were) their non-involvement was often experienced as a challenge to the legitimacy of

the community. Most members I spoke to in this situation were proud of their continued commitment to the church in what they considered difficult circumstances. At the same time they admitted they often felt guilty at leaving their families or resentful towards their families for standing between them and the church.

Rationalization, individualism and society

Rationalisation and individualism were identified as forces that destroyed community on a national as well as a personal or local scale. When I asked members why they thought that church membership was declining they often answered that they believed that many people felt the church was irrelevant to their lives. They often went on to explain that rationalisation and individualism had undermined people's support for the church and that this was a problem they felt the church had recognised but had yet to address.[16] The church lost support because people no longer felt it was necessary to be a part of a church, they felt they could survive the world on their own, outside the church and independent of any community.

On one Sunday the sermon at St Sebastian's was on the New Age. The vicar talked about the seductiveness of individualism and the possible consequences of embracing a 'me, me, me' outlook. When I talked to members of the congregation about the sermon they were familiar with the idea of the New Age and felt that it was an apt topic for a sermon. The New Age was identified as one of the chief culprits in the undermining of the church in the public eye. It encouraged a sense of independence and individuality. More seriously, members believed it actually fostered a sense of hostility to the church. They worried that they appeared staid, old-fashioned or dogmatic in comparison to the New Age. They also feared that the New Age looked more attractive to individuals seeking spiritual solutions because it was easier to 'do your own thing' than to join a community.

The responses of members to the New Age were ironic for two reasons. The first was that church members attributed a far greater coherence to the New Age than probably exists.[17] The second was that their deprecation of individualism and informality associated with the New Age contrasted to the welcome they gave such values in other contexts. Members often said they felt that it was wrong to impose beliefs, even deeply held religious beliefs, on others, yet they criticised the New Age for encouraging people to make up their own minds. Members criticised the leadership of the Church of England for not showing initiative or for not introducing new forms of services or not finding more attractive/modern ways of presenting the church to the public. Yet they also criticised the New Age for pandering to public demand by offering to accommodate every preference or taste of its followers.

Members particularly resented the perceived criticism of themselves that they were always trying to convert others or impose their faith on a disinterested audience. They continually stressed that not only did they not want to convert, but that the Church of England was a broad church which

could and did accommodate a vast range of beliefs and religious practices. At the same time church members spoke out against the New Age because it encouraged the fallacy that each individual could believe what they liked and gloried in the catholicism of its appeal.

In the discussion of the destructive power of individualism church members repeatedly blamed it for undermining community in wider society. At the same time, they did not recognise similar trends or practices within the church as individualism. One example of this was their attitude to certain moral issues.

When I asked members to give me examples of how individualism destroyed community, they often spoke about the rise in divorce, promiscuity, single families and crime. They pinpointed these trends as the consequence of a society where people repeatedly put their interests before the interests of others. However in the questionnaires and in discussions on morality and the church they indicated that they were unwilling to criticise these trends as a church.[18] In the interviews members made it clear that they did not feel it was the place of the church to speak on these issues, and that they did not believe that as individual Christians they should intervene in any way. Overwhelmingly members believed that the only role the church should take in relation to these issues was one of support where individuals sought guidance. Although members spoke of individualism and materialism with horror and although they believed these values destroyed community and undermined their church, they were unwilling for the church to speak out on these subjects.

The scarce community

There is one last link between the destruction of community and core members' attitude towards individualism that will be discussed in this chapter. Members believed that their decision to join a church was an individual choice on their part. Not only did they understand their decision to become a member of a church as a personal choice on their part, but they believed it was a moral choice, their understanding of their membership was that in some way it was a virtue.

The nature of a member's membership of the church was a question that I was keen to investigate in the interviews although it was a difficult issue to introduce without directly influencing the outcome. I could not ask members 'In what way is your membership of a church different from your membership of other organisations?' or 'Could you tell me what is unique or special about your membership of a church?' without directly implying that membership of a church was unique in some way. Other research into the nature of church membership has suggested that it is unique in some way. In her research into the nature of congregations as voluntary organisations Margaret Harris from the Centre for Voluntary Organisations at the London School of Economics argues that 'congregations are special case voluntary associations'. This is because congregations are subject to unique pressures, and membership is constrained by boundaries over which they have no control (Harris, M. 1998: 614).

I found that core members believed that their membership of a church was different from their membership of other groups because they believed their church was a community. More specifically they believed that the value of that membership was heightened by the fact that community was a rare thing in society. The lack of community they identified in everyday life and the qualities they associated with that absence appeared to reinforce their own appreciation of community. The consequences of living without community, shallow relationships, selfishness, materialism, lack of meaning served to increase the value they attributed both to community and belonging to a community.

When they were discussing why some people lived outside communities and others joined them, members seemed to regard their own decision to belong to a community as a virtue. They spoke of the sacrifices they made to maintain their membership and how difficult it was to sustain membership of an organisation that was so misunderstood by the public. Some members noted that would be easier not to be a member of their community because of the responsibilities and time that membership involved, they could understand why others, even children and spouses choose not to belong but that personally they did not want to take this easier option.

Some discussion of the nature of community has suggested that one of the appeals of community as an idealised concept is that it is perceived to be timeless and natural. Communities are thought not to be made but to be part of a long and timeless history in which community and tradition are seamlessly interwoven (Nisbet, R. 1966: 54). Graham Crow and Graham Allen, sociologists from the University of Southampton, argue that community is always a desirable condition but 'community ties are never more potent' than when 'community is perceived as a natural unity' (Crow, G. and Allen, G. 1994: 6). Similarly Zygmunt Bauman in his classic introduction to sociological thought *Thinking Sociology* argues that community is not merely the unity of certain individuals, but 'is thought of as a *natural* unity' (Bauman, Z. 1990: 72).

In contrast to the classical sociological discussion of community, the members I interviewed stressed the significance of personal responsibility in the creation and maintenance of community. They spoke of community not as something natural, timeless and traditional but as something that had to be created and forged in adverse conditions. They saw the contemporary absence of community, the scarcity of community, as the natural state of modern society, and the destruction of community by certain values as a moral mandate to maintain their own communities. Just as many members believed that their participation in the community through voluntary work was an example to people outside the church of Christian living so they also believed that their very membership of a community was also an example of how people could live in a community.

In a sense the perception that the majority of individuals lived without community, that community had been destroyed by the very qualities that were strongest in society informed the

value members placed on community and their membership of it. Not only did the perceived destruction of community enhance the value they attributed to it, but it influenced the nature of their commitment. They believed that their commitment to the church was different to their membership of other groups because the church was a community in a world where community was both desirable and scarce.

The percieved relationship between the absence of community and certain values was related to their understanding of the construction of community. Just as they believed that community could be destroyed by the selfish desires and unbridled interests of individuals they believed that communities could be constructed by the desire and efforts of people who committed themselves to the building of communities. Although the values they associated with the existence or absence of communites was similar in descriptive terms to the classical sociological tradition in terms of the nature of relationships that defined the community their understanding was the opposite.

Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to show that not only did core members associate certain values with the absence of community, but that they believed that these same values destroyed community. Individualism, selfishness, materialism, rationality were all given as examples of the values that thrived in the absence of community and which acted as a destructive current throughout society. The values that members identified with the lack of community were the same values identified by the classical sociologists in their discussion of community. On one level there was a parallel between the perception of the church members I interviewed and the analysis of the sociologists I discussed. In their categorisation of community and its opposite they both identified the same descriptive and normative values.

The parallel between them was limited to the extent that their choice of values for either community or its absence was the same. The early sociological tradition was shaped by the belief that the values and relationships they associated with the lack of community were grounded in the societies they studied. As a consequence they believed that Gelleschaft was an irrefutable dynamic within society, a force that was intrinsically linked to the structures and ethos of the industrialised world. In this sense the values associated with the absence of community had not destroyed community but were a consequence of the forces that caused its destruction.

In contrast members of both congregations believed that the values of materialism, individualism, etc, were responsible for the destruction of community both generally and of the communities in which they worshipped. They identified the prevalence of these values in society as the cause of their family's alienation from the church and of the general marginalisation of the church in society.

Members also believed that it was possible to resist the influence of destructive values. They saw the destruction of community as a widespread occurrence but not something that was inevitable and they believed that as individuals they could construct communities to resist the the negative values they associated with the absence of community. In the next chapter the exact nature of the communities members believed they could maintain through their congregations will be discussed in more detail.

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[1] The contemporary discussion of community is dealt with in later chapters. The relationship between the debates of the first sociologists and more modern discussions has already been established by other writers. See *Crises of Modernity: Political Sociology in Historical Contexts* by Peter Wagner for a more detailed discussion on the relationship between the two (Turner, S. ed. 1996: 109).

[2] Intellectuals of all types were obsessed with the rapid transformation in society at this time, including novelists and poets. In the work of some of the novelists of this time it is possible to observe their growing horror at the decline of a previous way of life. This is clearly evident in the work of Anthony Trollope. In 1874 Trollope wrote *The Way We Live Now*, a novel that was characterised by Trollope's great anger and disgust at the mores and standards of the last quarter of the nineteenth century and his grief at the loss a British past he so famously idealised in his Barchester Chronicles. (Edwards, P. 1978: 182)

[3] Throughout his career in public life Burke vocalised his fear of a society without boundaries and structures. Commenting on the difference between the English and the French revolutions in his *Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs* (1791) he recommended 'that state of habitual social discipline, in which the wiser, the more expert and the more opulent conduct, and by conducting, enlighten and protect the weaker, the less knowing and the less provided with the goods of fortune' (Hampson, N. 1990: 275).

[4] The pantheon of writers who are normally considered to constitute the classical tradition in sociology normally includes Marx. On the subject of community, the values associated with both the existence of community and its absence, all the writers in the early sociological tradition are in broad agreement except for Marx. Nisbet notes that 'from Comte to Weber' sociologists shared the same conceptual framework in their distinction between the 'communal and the non-communal...with only Marx dissenting significantly from the value implications carried by the contrast' (Nisbet, R. 1966: 48). Scherer also notes that Marx differed significantly from other sociologists in his analysis of the difference between the old forms of community and the new. She argues that Marx is confusing to read because while he looks with 'disdain' upon communities of place he welcomed the psychological community of place (Scherer, J. 1972: 5).

[5] In his preface to the second edition of *The Rules of Sociological Method* Durkheim argued that up to now our behaviour and society have been influenced by social institutions which have been bequeathed to us and over which we have no control. However the modern sociologist using the correct method might not only be able to 'penetrate the social world' but to dispel the

'deplorable prejudice' that man can have no insight into the working of his world (Durkheim, E. 1938: lviii).

[6] The differences in *The Division of Labour in Society* and *Suicide* are not differences in either Durkheim's methodology or his fundamental premise on the nature or importance of community. Rather the differences concern his analysis of the potential to create the communities he believed were necessary for man to live a healthy moral and social life (Nisbet, R. 1966: 87).

[7] In the preface to the second edition of *The Division of Labour*, published in 1902, Durkheim repudiated his own argument about the growth of solidary.

[8] In his analysis of Weber's work on the nature of modern bureaucratic society Campbell notes that despite Weber's view on the negative impulses he 'betrays a tentative admiration for the achievements of the modern state' (Campbell, T. 1981: 169).

[9] In his introduction to *The Theory of Social and Economic Organisation* Talcott Parsons argues that the central problem for Weber was developing a schema that was both general and which would accommodate an understanding of society in which individual actions could be accounted for (1964: 11).

[10] Weber argued that social action could be classified into four types but warned that the action of any one individual was a composite of different types. Categorising social action into four types was useful because it allows the sociologist to investigate trends of behaviour within society (Weber, 1964: 117).

[11] By communal relationships Weber was referring to relationships which were based on subjective feelings, tradition, family ties or nationalism. By associative, he means action which is rationally motivated (Weber, 1964: 136-139).

[12] Tonnies insistence that the forces shaping society were impersonal influenced his views on the future of community. In *Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft* he debates the possibility of society returning to a Gemeinschaft type but he stresses that a return is only possible if the correct conditions exist in society. That is the mere desire or longing on the part of individuals for a return to the past is insufficient to bring about a revival of Gemeinschaft. (Tonnies, F. 1955: 17)

[13] Berger believes that Weber's theme in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* has been consistently misunderstood by his critics. Berger argues that Weber believes not that human ideas are the causal dynamic behind history but the opposite. Weber is concerned with the irony of human beliefs and actions; that 'consequences took place regardless of intentions' (Berger, P. 1963: 52).

[14] In his analysis of Weber's work Bryan Turner notes that Weber was preoccupied with discovering a solution to the trend he identified within capitalism, and that he rejected several solutions to the problem of the lack of community in society. He says that Weber finally 'puts his bet on personal responsibility in a calling in science or politics' (Turner, B. 1991: 18) rather than a solution based on individuals.

[15] In *The Division of Labour in Society* Durkheim stresses that the prevailing crisis of 'moral doctrines and customs' is not merely a crisis of ideas but one that is rooted in the material changes in society.

> Our illness is not, then, as has often been believed, of an intellectual sort; it has more profound causes....Because certain of our duties are no longer founded in the reality of things, breakdown has resulted which will be repaired only so in so far as a new discipline is established in the silence of the study: it can arise only through itself, little by little, under the pressure of internal causes which make it necessary.' (Durkheim, E. 1964: 409)

[16] The opinion of non-church members that individual worship outside the church is as valid as collective worship inside the church is a theory that the Church of England has explicitly addressed on several occasions. In 1952 the Rev Sanders, Prebendary of St. Pauls Cathedral published a small pamphlet *Why Go To Church?* which discussed the question of individualism in the form of a conversation between a Christian who is a member of a church and a Christian who believes that 'religion is a purely personal matter'. Although the pamphlet is now two generations old, objection to the validity of individual worship has retained a central position both in the minds of the laity and the Doctrinal Commission (see especially its report of 1981, *Believing in the Church).*

[17] Paul Heelas believes there are many popular and sociological misconceptions of the New Age, one of which is its independence as a discrete religious movement (Heelas, P. 1996: 64-77).

[18] See chapter 8: A Belief in Belonging for a more detailed discussion on this issue.

Chapter 8

A Belief in Belonging

The most recent discussion of community in philosophical and sociological discourse has taken place in the debate between communitarians and liberals. The current debate about community is relevant to this thesis's concern with participation and belonging for a number of reasons. The first is that the debate illustrates the most developed of contemporary ideas of the importance of community and what community actually means in its most modern context. Secondly it demonstrates the extent to which the idea of community has come to be redefined from a physical entity that was shaped by its place and environment to a phenomenon that exists within the boundaries of personal, interpersonal and individual relationships.

It is the discussion of the role of the individual in relation to a community that is particularly interesting in regards to my own research. In previous chapters some aspects of community have already been examined and it is apparent that the individual and the quality of interpersonal relations are significant in members' conception of community. Core and non-core members value the idea of community and associate certain values and types of relationship with it.

Further clues as to members' understanding of the relationship between community and the role of the individual were also evident in the earlier chapters on commitment. Members believed that the most significant aspect of their membership of a church was their personal commitment to the church itself. Furthermore they defined commitment not just in terms of their beliefs but their actions, members continually stressed the importance of personal responsibility and personal commitment.

A similar emphasis on the importance of the individual was evident in their views on the communication of commitment. The idea of active evangelism, the prospect of explicitly engaging in activities which would force them to attempt to draw people into the church was one that most members found abhorrent. They preferred to see their commitment to the church as a private affair, a personal choice that did not entail a responsibility to force that choice on others. Although they would like others to share their commitment to the church, their own commitment was an individual experience and one which they found difficult to communicate to others.

Earlier chapters have discussed aspects of community but there are areas of the relationship between members' perceptions of their community and the congregations that have not been explored. One aspect is the exact nature of the congregations as communities. We know the values that members ascribed to communities but the actual nature of those communities has not been discussed. A second and related question is the understanding of their community held by members. How did members define their own community, what special features did they associate to the communities of which they were apart?

The aim of this chapter is to discuss and attempt to answer these questions. The chapter is divided into two parts. The first is a discussion of the significance of the individual in the debate between communitarians and liberals. I have focused on this particular discussion for several reasons. The first is that it is the most recent discourse on community and society. The second is because in this latest discussion the relationship between the individual and community is of particular importance. This section of the chapter will also explore the question of what constitutes moral behaviour in the context of the community suggested by communitarian thinking. The second part will examine the idea of community and moral behaviour within the community as perceived by the members of both congregations. It situates this discussion within a discussion of community and moral behaviour within the church itself. This is partly to provide a context for the discussion but also because in some way the wider discussions of community both in the church and in political and philosophical discourse are related.

Liberals and communitarians

The significance of community is one of the key areas of discussion between liberals and communitarians. An area of ambiguity in this discussion is the fluidity of both the terms, liberalism and communitarianism. Not only do both 'liberalism and communitarianism mean different things to different people' (Mulhall, S. and Swift, A. 1992: viii), but different representatives in the debate have altered their definitions of the terms used several times (Sandel, M. 1987: 60). Despite this ambiguity it is generally accepted that liberals support the concept of universal right and the exercise of those rights by the individual within the framework of a social contract (Rawls, J. 1993: xv). Conversely, communitarians situate the individual at the centre of a community, the obligations and responsibility to the community preempt any notion of rights (Moody, T. 1992: 92).

Throughout the 1980s liberals and communitarians debated the virtues of community, the rights and obligations of individuals and the relationship between individuals within society. The communitarian/liberal discourse of the eighties was mostly fought in the arena of political and moral philosophy. It was an academic discussion in which there was no formal grouping of the 'communitarian' camp or recognition on their part that they shared a common outlook (Arthur, J. 2000: 4). As the debate spilled over into the next decade the character of the discussion was transformed by new trends in political analysis and developments in thinking on welfare and democracy in Western society. Ultimately the ideas generated by the conflict between communitarian and liberal authors have entered and now regularly inform popular political discussion and current affairs in Europe and America.[1] Although there are differences, the academic and more popularly styled debates both give primacy to community and their focus on rights and responsibilities is also similar.

The discussion between communitarians and liberals takes the form of a communitarian critique of rights-based individualism. Essentially communitarians have variously argued that rights-based liberalism destabilises society and undermines the potential of the individual. Their counterpoint to individualism is community. They stress the need to rebuild communities and the importance of reciprocal relationships between the individual and the rest of society. This section of the chapter will focus on the meaning and construction of society and its relationship to the individual as it is defined by communitarian thinking.

The debate between communitarians and liberals is wide ranging but there are several recurring themes. Although the liberal/communitarian debate is a contemporary discussion[2] in its present form, the vision of community most often referred to in the debate is in many ways reminiscent of past definitions. An examination of the similarities between the communitarian interpretation of community and past writers establishes the tradition of which communitarians are a part, but also indicates what is qualitatively new about their theories.

Although the communitarian critique implies the possibility and desirability of a new and future society many authors share a sense of nostalgia for the virtues of bygone communities. MacIntyre's writings are distinctly nostalgic,[3] while writers like the American social scientist Etzioni give an analysis of modern American society which overtly mourns a past golden age when Americans lived in fully functioning communities and exercised not only their rights but also their responsibilities. (Etzioni, A. 1997: 64)

Many communitarians share a vision of community with previous writers on the subject that is nostalgic and one that also assumes the inherent desirability of community. Many of them also share an interpretation of community that is essentially normative. For instance, Charles Taylor, one of the key thinkers in relation to the development of communitarian thought (Mulhall, S. and Swift, A. 1992: 37) in *Sources of the Self* argues that the self is only fully the self if it is situated as part of a community. The community is inherently good and to be part of a community is automatically a desirable state. Taylor describes the self as existing and functioning most perfectly in 'webs of interlocution' (Taylor, C. 1990: 36). Where the self exists outside these webs it is not in its natural environment. Taylor assumes that for a self to be defined by the community is intrinsically good. Conversely he argues that a self-defined and articulated individual outside the community is damaged and incomplete (Taylor, C. 1990: 27).

In their overview of the central themes of communitarianism, academics, Shlomo Avineri and Avner de Shalit point to the normative interpretation of community as common to all communitarian writings (Avineri, A. and de Shalit, A. 1995:10). Their writings generally assume that the very premises of liberalism and individualism are faulty. Individualism not only creates a distorted society in which individuals are incapable of functioning in ways which are morally acceptable but in opposing the creation of communities they deny the possibility of a society in which behaviour that is morally acceptable is encouraged.

The last way in which the modern communitarian tradition shares its interpretation of community with past writers is in the pedigree of the ideas themselves. Many of the key ideas at the core of communitarian thinking are part of a long tradition in the European discourse on the relationship between rights and responsibilities, the individual and the state and the individual and morality.[4]

Holmes firmly establishes communitarian ideas in the context of anti-liberal thinking in the 1930s. In his history of the development of thinking on rights and liberal institutions C Bay traces the communitarian emphasis on responsibilities to the flaws and tensions inherent in the theories of Hobbes and Locke (Bay, C. in Dallmayr, 1978: 35). Alternatively, in their survey of the various critiques of Rawls's *Theory of Justice,* political theorists, C, Kukathus and P, Pettit situate modern communitarian critiques of liberalism in the same category as Rousseau, Hegal and Marx (Kukathus, C. and Pettit, P. 1990: 94).

Despite their links with the past, communitarian ideas are distinctly contemporary in several ways. To characterise them as merely an anti-liberal reworking of a past tradition would be to neglect some of the most important features of community as it has been reposed in the liberal/communitarian discourse.

The new community

The two overriding features of communitarian thinking are that it is post-liberal and that it situates the individual as a moral agent at the heart of the community. It is these two features that set the communitarian idea of community apart from its predecessors and which have the greatest impact on the most recent theories of participation and belonging in society.

As a body of thought, communitarianism explicitly defines itself against a society in which liberal values and liberal practices have operated without success for two centuries. (MacIntrye, A.1966: 266) The communitarian/liberal discussion is not a debate between systems or thinking on the ideological level. Rather one is a defence of values that are established in Western society while the other is a critique not merely of a rival philosophy, but of an allegedly bankrupt philosophy. A recurring theme in their writings is that of the community as a restorative against the effects of the malaise of individualism. It is this understanding of individualism as inherently destructive that is at the heart of their critique:

> Community is a post-liberal philosophy in the sense that it could only have developed within a liberal tradition of established democratic practices, and in a liberal culture that had allowed community values to disintegrate to the extent that a corrective seemed necessary. Community was proposed as just such a corrective. (Daly, M. 1991: xiii)

The emphasis on the redeeming qualities of community is evident in both the academic discussion and its overtly political counterpart. The works of the leading American social scientist Etzioni are a good example of the way in which the recreation of community is articulated as a strategy for negating the consequences of liberalism. Etzioni believes that the values associated with individualism erode the moral foundations of society by elevating rights over responsibilities. Consequently, modern society is composed of numerous special interest groups who all demand that society honours their rights but who are all unwilling to fulfil their obligations. Not only does this lead to conflict between groups, but important areas of public life are neglected and abused as a consequence.

Etzioni argues that the re-balancing between rights and responsibilities would be the first step towards recreating communities and eradicating the excesses of individualism. He proposes that some rights are restricted and some responsibilities encouraged by the state. He is especially eager to put the family at the centre of this programme because he believes that the family is at the heart of the community. He argues that one method of preventing the further degeneration of community is to discourage divorce and ensure that child-rearing is viewed not as a 'personal private matter' but as an 'act that has significant consequences for the community' (Etzioni, A. 1993: 88).

The anti-modern individual

The community proposed by communitarians is not only post-liberal but in its critique of liberalism, it is anti-modern. In criticising the premises and consequences of liberalism communitarians stress a community that is defined by its hostility towards the defining features of modernity. Although writers who are often grouped together under the label 'communitarian' do not form a uniform or coherent political or philosophical outlook,[5] one common theme is their rejection of the key features of modernity. Once again the aspect of modernity which draws their ire is the prospect of the unfettered individual. This is an individual who exercises unlimited rights and who does so in the belief that all men are due certain universal rights by virtue of belonging to a universal humanity.

The feminist political scientist Elizabeth Frazer argues that although communitarians have no programme they are united against liberalism as an ideal and its tangible effects within society. More specifically communitarians reject the idea of universalism. As such the communitarian critique is characterised by the 'broader theme of dissatisfaction with modernity' (Frazer, E.1993: 102).

The dissatisfaction with modernity fuels communitarian writings in two ways. The first is that it is the consequences of liberalism which gives rise to their initial criticism. Societies in which people refuse or are incapable of participating; individuals and groups who demand scarce

resources; families, institutions and nations which operate without morality: all these are common features identified with liberalism and often the focus of the communitarian critique.

The second impact that dissatisfaction with modernity has on communitarian writings is that it contributes to the type and the character of the communities they wish to see. Communitarianism has been called a negative critique - it attacks, deconstructs and condemns but offers no alternatives to the philosophy and structures it rejects (Holmes, S. 1989: 231). However in the process of criticising liberalism, communitarian writers implicitly provide an alternative to liberal ideas and liberal society. Many of the features associated with the communitarian vision of a communal society are defined by what they identify as the failings of liberal society. This process is a negative one but it still tells us a great deal about the nature of the society communitarians would like to see (Daly, M. 1991: xvi). The communitarian critique of liberalism, with its distaste for modernity, provides the framework for the values and morality communitarians holds to be positive. The same critique suggests some of the qualities, attributes and modes of behaviour they would find desirable in an individual. Sandel's writings on the individual in liberal society are an example of this process.

Sandel's work has been described as almost entirely negative (Frazer, E. and Lacey, N.1993: 102). It was Sandel who, in his 1982 *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice,* first offered a critique of the political theorist Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* and it was Sandel who was the first to initiate the communitarian concern with the definition of the individual within liberal thinking. One of his key criticisms of Rawls's theory of justice lies in his critique of the liberal conception of the individual. He argues that, Rawls's theory that justice is the first virtue of social life stems from a faulty premise. This is because for it to work 'we must be persons independent of our particular interests and attachments, capable of standing back, to survey, assess and revise them' (Sandel, M.1982: 1751). Sandel rejects Rawls's idea of a 'veil of ignorance'[6] on the grounds that it is impossible. Individuals are not capable of making decisions independently of their communities. Sandel believes that individuals who can make moral choices, based on Rawls's theory are not real, functioning individuals - rather they are detached, abstract and 'radically disembodied' (Sandel, M. 1982: 21). In other words, Rawls's theory is based on a false premise and is therefore illegitimate.

Sandel's critique of Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* indicates two major features of community Sandel favours. The first is that Sandel believes that communities cannot be sustained through individuals associating together on the basis of preference or will power alone. Sandel suggests that this scenario presupposes that a community already exists. According to Rawls it is possible for individuals, outside a community (what Sandel calls presocial individuals) to decide to participate in a community with other presocial individuals. Sandel argues that presocial individuals are incapable of making competent moral decisions. Only individuals who are already grounded in society, who have definable interests which are particular to their circumstances, are capable of forming and sustaining communities.

Implicit in Sandel's writings is a definition of the individual whose morality, concepts of justice and values are specific to them. These are not 'universal' individuals, they are not able to express the interests of the whole of society. Instead they are only capable of articulating the concerns that affect them immediately. It is the very embeddedness of Sandel's individual which confines him or her to the preoccupations and demands of the communities to which they already belong. However it is this same embeddedness which ensures that communities are cohesive and unlikely to fragment or be divided by competing interests and demands. These new communities are not subject to the tensions created by individuals who are characterised by their ability to exercise unlimited rights. Instead these communities are maintained by individuals who are characterised by their obligation s, duties and responsibilities to the community they belong to.

Sandel's critique of Rawls provides one other clue to the communitarian conception of the relationship between the individual and the community. One of the basic tenets of liberalism is that the individual and rights are the prior concept that underpin the social contract. Although Rawls has changed and adapted his position on liberal rights many times since the publication of *A Theory of Justice* there are consistent themes throughout his work.[7] One of those themes or liberal principles is that he assumes that all individuals possess a sense of justice. It is this sense of justice which allows the individual to choose a version of society from behind the veil of ignorance. Rawls believes that the society individuals would choose is one based on their freedom to exercise their rights and one in which the same rights were given to all. This is why Rawls is keen to stress that a desirable society is neither a community nor an association. It is not a community because the free exercise of rights makes it open-ended, a society without defined aims and ends. Neither is it an association because unlike the association it does not offer different terms to its members (Rawls, J. 1993: 42). In his rejection of Rawls's 'just individual' Sandel posits an entirely new conception of the individual, one that is neither possessed of an objective sense of justice nor of the ability, let alone the freedom to, exercise rights.

The responsible individual

The definition and understanding of the individual is a key factor in the communitarian theories of community and their critique of liberalism. As with many of the ideas and themes associated with communitarian writings, the idea of the individual is partly defined in opposition to liberal thinking on this subject.

The second feature of community that Sandel implies through his critique of Rawls is that it is the definition of the individual that defines the community. The question of the source of community is a recurring and often confusing theme in communitarian writings. Critics of communitarianism have noted that some communities appear to argue over the extent that individuals are at once created and formed by their communities, yet these same individuals also determine the nature of their communities (Frazer, E. and Lacey, N. 1993: 105).

Sandel objects to the idea of the moral, abstracted individual because he believes this individual to be a phantom, a ghost-like being with no real existence in the material world. He believes that individuals acquire their ability to make moral choices only through their participation in a community; he sees the community as prior to the individual. It is prior logically but it is also primary because it is the more important (Kykathus, C. and Pettit, P. 1990: 104).

The communitarians rejection of the individual as a moral being before community indicates their belief that it is the community which enhances and completes the individual and not the other way around. As Sandel notes, the community is not an option for the individual - he must always be a part of it or cease to be a complete individual. He also notes that an individual is attached to a community not through rational choice but because we are born into them. This means that Rawls's hypothesis that we are free to choose is a false premise. Without acting or will we are all 'members of this family or community or nation or people, as bearers of this history, as sons or daughters of that revolution, as citizens of this republic' (Bell, D. 1993: 4).

The equation between the well-being of the individual and his organic relationship with his community has implications for the status of rights. In Rawlsian liberal thinking the moral individual has primacy and therefore his rights and his ability and prerogative to exercise them are also primary. In communitarian thinking, the community is prior. Therefore any rights given to the individual are determined by the interests of the community (Howard, R. 1995: 36).

Some communitarian writers present the restriction of rights as a positive feature of community, while others present it as an act necessary for the health and survival of the community as a whole (Jantzen, G. 1992: 8). In the *Spirit of Community* Etzioni explicitly condemns the preoccupation with rights as socially destructive and negative. His interpretation of the social and economic trends that characterised Western society in the 1980s is that they are a graphic example of what happens when rights are not restricted:

> The eighties tried to turn vice into virtue by elevating the unbridled pursuit of self-interest and greed to the level of social virtue. It turned out that an economy could thrive (at least for a while)...but it became evident that a society cannot function well given such sel-centred, me-istic orientations. (Etzioni, A. 1993: 24)

The communitarian hostility towards the moral individual of Rawls's liberalism is a defining feature of their interpretation of community. For communitarians, a community is more than the random collection of individuals. A community is a collection of individuals who believe they are bound together by ties of obligation, identity and history. (Bell, D. 1993: 103)

However this analysis does not reveal what communitarian writers identify as the source of community. Writers like Sandel and Taylor suggest that individuals are the product of their

communities. For Taylor individuals are physically the product of their communities. For MacIntyre individuals may live in groups but without communal relations every aspect of life is arbitrary and meaningless. Communitarian writers agree that the individual is an integral part of the community but its origins remain unclear.

The reason for this ambiguity lies in the dual relationship of individuals to the community. In the first instance individuals are the products of their communities. However communitarian writers also expect the individual to choose the community they wish to live and participate in. This means that the individual is at the same time passive and active. (Haber, H. 1994: 121) The individual is the product of his community and also the source of his community. Frazer and Lacey, describe this contradiction as a dominant tension that informs all communitarian thinking. They note that, at the same time, communitarians insist that individuals 'do not have any irreducible ontological status - they are not in any sense presocial' (Frazer, E. and Lacey, N. 1993: 150). They expect individuals to act as empowered moral individuals who retain the ability to choose to enter or reject a community. Frazer and Lacey believe that if it really is the case that individuals are constructed by their communities then these same individuals are incapable of acting in any other way than that predetermined by their immediate relationships and environment.

Frazer and Lacey reject this interpretation of the self, partly because it serves to confirm the position of women as wives, mothers and carers, but also because this is an idea of personhood that is 'incoherent' (Frazer, E. and Lacey, 1993: 152). By incoherent they mean that the commmunitarian model of the self is inherently ambiguous. At once it is a self formed, created and grounded in communal ties *and* at the same time it is a self that is able to choose to act, to participate and consciously embrace and express loyalty to the community of choice.

Despite the ambiguity at the heart of the communitarian analysis of the individual it is still the individual who bears the burden of ensuring that communities exist and function. In their rejection of the liberal conception of the moral individual who chooses to pursue his rights, the communitarians present an individual who, realising he is only fully human in a community seeks to commit himself to a community. It is the choice of the individual to create and participate in the community that makes the existence of the community a possibility.

The central role of the individual who chooses community obligations over the freedom to exercise their rights is seen in the question of values and morality in the communitarian/liberal discourse. In both liberal and communitarian thinking one of the most important attributes of the individual is that he chooses the values he lives by. Liberals and communitarians agree that values determine the lives of the individual but they disagree over which values and over what constitutes moral behaviour.

It is noticeable that the morals which communitarians associate with communal relationships are chiefly characterised and defined in opposition to the morals associated with the liberal tradition. For instance many communitarian thinkers link morally unacceptable behaviour with the ideals and institutions of liberalism (Bay, C. 1978: 28). MacIntryre goes so far as to suggest that the absence of morality in liberal society is compounded by its institutions and that those institutions would have to be rebuilt if the morality of the community is to be transformed (MacIntyre, A. in ed. Delaney, C. 1994: 17).

In his analysis of the effect of individualism on commitment in American life Bellah is just as certain of the link between liberal society and a moral crisis, and he is just as vitriolic in his critique of the effects of liberal values on society as MacIntyre. Bellah accuses liberal society of producing individuals whose morality is 'impoverished', whose institutions 'cut us of from the past' and of celebrating an ethos that makes its members narrow-minded and self-centred (Bellah, R. 1987: 4). Taylor also identifies liberal institutions with the perpetuation of a moral vacuum. Taylor argues that it is the institutions created by liberal society which place individuals in positions where any kind of moral life is impossible. Caught in jobs which are meaningless, in a society driven by material acquisition, individuals are subject to humiliation, subordination and the soulless pursuit of individualism that only dehumanises them further (Taylor, C. 1985: 183-205).

Many of the values communitarians attribute to liberal society resemble the values Tonnies associated with associational society. Where bonds exist they are fragile; there is no communal ethos, no loyalty, and self-interest and selfish behaviour characterises the individuals in these societies. The morality communitarians link with communities is very different. The first and obvious difference is that morality exists. As Kukathus and Pettit note in their survey of the communitarian critique of Rawls, a common assumption of communitarian writers is that in a liberal society where each individual pursues his own moral path, no morality is possible at all (Kukathus, C. and Pettit, P. 1990: 95). Avineri and de Shalit argue that the morality articulated by communitarians is a very specific type of morality. In other words, morality is not abstract but defined by its relation to the community in question.

However Avineri and de Shalit note that the values associated with communitarian writers are not general, abstract or universal but specific to particular communities. They adopt the Hegelian distinction between Moralitat - abstract or universal rules of morality and Sittlichkeit - ethical principles that are specific to a certain community to describe the different associated with liberalism and communitarianism. For Hegel and communitarian writers, sittlichkeit is the highest form of morality because 'it is the only way that genuine moral autonomy and freedom can be achieved' (Avineri, S. and de Shalit, A. 1992: 2).

This emphasis on the legitimacy of particular morality is opposed to the liberal emphasis on abstract and universal laws that apply to all society (Ferrara, A. in ed. Rasmussen, D. 1990: 14).

However the communitarian articulation of a sittlichkeit type of morality tells us something more about the communitarian view of the individual. In the writings of Walzer, the relationship between sittlichkeit and the individual is explored in depth. Like many other communitarian writers, Walzer is keen to develop his theories in response to Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*. He particularly objects to Rawls'spremise that justice is universal and that it is possible for a moral or political philosopher to stand outside a community and comprehend reality. For Walzer not only is the concept of universal truths misconceived, but the very search for them is a falsehood (Walzer, M. 1981: 379-99).[8] Walzer believes that how people live in their communities is the most important element in understanding the relationship between individuals. More specifically, how communities distribute wealth, what they value and how they regulate themselves are factors that determine morality. In this context, communities are culturally specific, and the values and practices they live by are also culturally defined.

In his analysis of how communities are created and maintained Walzer brings together his theory of the particular nature of morality and cultural specificity. He begins by asking how communities are constituted and notes that all communities have to decide who is a part of them, who is outside, who they should admit and on what basis they judge them eligible for membership. Walzer believes that the type of cross-cultural generosity illustrated in the parable of the Good Samaritan is exceptional and unrealistic. It is more likely that our strongest ties are with our families - where membership is determined by the accident of birth. In every other type of community, membership is determined by whom is excluded and the basis for exclusion is normally the failure to adopt certain values and behaviour. Those who refuse or who are unable to adopt the communal values or behaviour are prevented from joining those communities.

Walzer argues there can be no community without the right of closure and exclusion (Walzer in Avineri, S. and Shalit, A. 1992: 84). The importance Walzer places on exclusion reinforces the significance of the individual in the formation and maintenance of a community. Individuals who have inappropriate morals are not members of the community - they, therefore are exempt from the responsibilities of the community, but they are also denied its privileges.

Walzer's emphasis on the need for exclusion and membership of community underlines the importance many communitarian writers place on the ability of the individual to choose which values he sympathises with. This ability to choose has important consequences for the relationship between the individual and community. Individuals who are excluded from communities because they do not accept the values of that community do so by choice. This means that ultimately the survival of the community is dependent on the choices of individuals. Taylor argues that in order to realise their full potential as individuals, individuals will protect their communities. To protect their communities, individuals will also support institutions which can exclude those who do not share their values and prevent them from joining their community:

> since the free individual can only maintain his identity within a society/culture of a certain kind, he has to be concerned about the shape of this society/culture as a whole....It is important to him that certain activities and institutions flourish in society. It is even of importance to him what the moral tone of the whole society is – shocking as it may be to libertarians to raise this issue – because freedom and individual diversity can only flourish in a society where there is a general recognition of their worth. They are threatened by the spread of bigotry, but also by other conceptions of life....If realising our freedom partly depends on the society and culture in which we live, then we exercise a fuller freedom if we can determine the shape of this society and culture. And this we can only do through instruments of communal decision. (Taylor, C. 1995: 47 in Aveineri, S. and de Shalit, A.)

The responsibility of individuals to rebuild communities is echoed in the work of Etzioni. He states that a commitment to moral values will enable individuals to act in ways which will not continually undermine community. He sees 'a general shoring up of our moral foundations' (Etzioni, A. 1993: 11) as the basis which will allow individuals to act responsibly. Some rights must be curtailed, not because of a desire for the authority of the state over the individual but because the continued exercise of rights without moral boundaries destroys society. Etzioni calls for society to institutionalise morality so that acting in a morally acceptable manner is easier for the individual (Etzioni, A.1992: 78). Etzioni believes that individuals need help to sustain their moral behaviour - tougher laws on divorce, changes in taxation, moral education in schools, yet he ultimately agrees with Anderson and other communitarian thinkers; values and the moral behaviour of individuals has a key role to play in the rebuilding of communities.

Communitarian writers vary in the extent to which they articulate their idea of community (Frazer, E and Lacey, N.1992: 102). However an overview of the communitarian critique of liberalism provides a basic picture of their vision of a post-liberal community. Although some aspects are more contentious,[9] there are significant areas of agreement.

The first is the communitarian identification of liberal modernity as the major factor in the destruction of community and community values. Liberalism is the source 'of the agonies of the modern world' (Dallmayr, D. 1978: 29). It is misleading to characterise the liberal/communitarian discourse as a debate formed between those who believe in rights and the individual on the one side, and those who believe in community and communal or collective decisions on the other.

> The debate is not a conflict between the values of liberty and community....Nor are the extreme positions-self seeking individualism and unreflective collectivism - under consideration. The debate focuses on the theoretical and social consequences of stressing either liberty or community as the primary value in society. (Daly, 1994: xix)

It is more accurate to view the communitarian hostility towards liberalism not as a hostility towards rights as such, but towards unbridled, universal rights - rights without moral boundaries, rights without responsibilities to balance and check them. It is the freewheeling nature of rights within modern liberal society which communitarians object to.

The second common theme within communitarian writings is their understanding of the self. The communitarian view of the self is important because it lays the foundation for the communitarian understanding of how communities should be rebuilt. Although there are differences among communitarian writers on this theme (Frazer, E. and Lacey, N.1993: 107), the overriding theme is that individuals can only fully reach their potential within a community because the self is not abstract, but gendered and situated.

Again it is a mistaken caricature to present the communitarian/liberal discourse as individualists versus anti-individualists. Individualism is not an anathema to communitarian thinking. Rather, communitarians believe the individual functions most productively in a community. Communitarians may reject the unbridled individualism of liberalism but they applaud the individual's pursuit of goals and behaviour that reinforce community values and institutions. It is not the conscious individual who takes moral choices that communitarians object to, it is the conscious, moral individual who rejects his community and seeks to serve itself that they find offensive. Communitarians are generally sceptical about the extent to which individuals can distance themselves from the social relationships which they are born into or connected to (Kymlika, W. 1991:1). Therefore the liberal emphasis on individuals' capacity for free choice is exaggerated and meaningless. Consequently, if the ability of individuals to make choices independently of the communities of which they are a part is redundant, then the liberal support for individuals and justice as the first principle is also meaningless. The communitarian self, that is both situated and predisposed to its own community not only defines their critique of liberalism, it also shapes their understanding of the process by which communities can be rebuilt.

The third theme is the communitarian projection of future communities. Underlying the communitarian critique is the expectation that only moral individuals choosing to fulfil their responsibilities to their communities can help to re-establish them. Communitarian writers point to other factors which are necessary to the reconstruction of community - moral education, supportive institutions, agreed criteria for membership and exclusion from communities. However they all agree that in the last instance a individual must desire to fulfil his obligations to his community, or as Howard, explains, individuals must possess an 'ethical individualism' (Howard, R.1995:196).

Conclusion

The importance, of the role of the individual in the reconstruction of community is evident in both the academic and the more popular communitarian writings. In its more popular form, the role of the individual is explicit (Bell, B.1993: 1). In the more academic communitarian tracts the necessity for the individual to act is frequently implicit. However the duty of individuals to act morally as fundamental to the resurrection and maintenance of community is common to all communitarian writings.

The most distinctive feature of the communitarian vision of a reconstructed community is the prioritisation of the individual in this process. In as much as they are defined, communitarians define communities as collections of individuals who act morally. The communitarian critique of liberalism rests first on their definition of the individual. The individual is situated - the individual must act within the boundaries established by his culture and existing social relationships. Secondly the communitarians attack the liberal focus on rights as leading the individual to choose to exercise excessive rights over communal obligations. Therefore if communities are to be rebuilt, rights must be curtailed and individuals should choose to act morally and prioritise the needs of community over their personal interests. Consequently, the interpersonal nature of the relationships between individuals provides both the basis for the communitarian critique of liberalism and the communitarian definition of a desirable community.

The focus on the types of interpersonal behaviour and qualities needed to sustain a community underlines communitarian thinking but it is also a part of a wider discussion on the dynamic and trends which shape modern society. An aspect of this is the popularity of the term 'trust' to describe the nature of relationships that allow modern society to function coherently and productively. Giddens identifies the complementary concepts of trust and risk to describe the central relationship of society. Although he emphasises that for him trust is not a quality invested in individuals, but in abstract capacities (Giddens, A. 1990: 26), it is the trust that individuals are forced to invest in each other which regulates society and serves 'to reduce or minimise the dangers to which particular types of activity are subject' (Giddens, A. 1990: 35).

Jon Elster, Professor of Political Science at the University of Chicago, addresses the same question of cohesion in the modern world more directly than Giddens but with similar conclusions. He asks what stops society from disintegrating? What is the cement which holds society together? He concludes that there is no impersonal dynamic present in society that allows it to function. Rather it is the case that there are individuals who interact with each other more closely than with others and that it is trust which facilitates the relationships between individuals and their chosen groups. Without trust 'the wheels of society would come to a standstill' (Elster, J.1989: 252).

Although Giddens and Elster identify trust as a key element in the organisation of modern society, social scientist Misztal locates the importance of trust as a central concept at a more

general level. She argues that trust is an integral part of the current discussion over the moral basis of the new industrial order. She notes that in all the most recent discussions of the relationship between individuals and society, trust is highlighted as an essential ingredient in the cohesiveness of society and the bond between individuals.

Misztal in her important book on social bonds, *Trust*, identifies the communitarian/liberal discourse as one of several discussions in which the idea of trust is highlighted. However she notes that in every discussion, it is the belief that the previous basis for social co-operation, solidarity and consensus have been eroded that has lead to the search for alternatives (Misztal, B.1996: 3). More importantly she argues that the attempts to integrate society as a series of trust relationships represents an entirely new approach to the understanding of the relationships between individuals, an approach to community which is almost the opposite to the analysis of the classical sociologists. While Weber, Tonnies and Durkheim recognised trust as an important element within society, for them the key feature of this trust was that it was impersonal and abstract, rather than personal and based on individuals (Misztal, B. 1996: 210).

The understanding of community has evolved to a significant degree in the last 200 years. From its original conception as a product of a particular rural or industrial environment, defined and constrained by the conditions in which it was situated, to a series of interpersonal relationships, defined and constrained by the level of trust and the desire to belong in a society, the community is transformed. The new community as it is articulated by communitarian writers is not only different in its definition but those differences raise a number of questions about the attempts of organisations to rebuild their communities in the modern world.

We already know from the communitarian/liberal discourse that the communities in question do not actually exist in the present. But if individuals or institutions attempted to build them, where would they start? If they were established, how durable would they be? If the bonds that forge communities are constituted by personal loyalties and trust are they susceptible to pressures and fragmentation or are they immune. More significantly, if communities do not exists what does it mean when institutions attempt to build them?

Ross Poole, Associate Professor of Philosophy at Macquaire University in Australia argues that communitarians are essentially utopian in their desire for community, they long for a world in which communal relationships are the norm but they choose to ignore the impossibility of their dream (Poole, R.1991: 88). There is no room in this chapter to explore the possibilities and the consequences of constructing the communities communitarians celebrate in any general sense. However, his comments are significant in the light of the central themes of his thesis. The possibility of individuals attempting to create to create their own communities is one that is at the heart of my investigation into the congregations of St Martin's and St Sebastian's.

Other chapters have already established the Church of England's self-recognition as a community and more pertinently that it is an institution which wants to rebuild itself as a community. In the light of the previous discussion, an obvious question is what the church means when it talks of communities, the value of community and then attempts to rebuild itself as a community within society. It seems clear that the mainstream, philosophical and sociological discourse on community implies a series of interpersonal relationships, and emphasises the obligation and responsibility of the individual to begin and to sustain this process. The next section of the chapter will examine core members perception of their attempts to build a community and the nature of the community itself.

What type of community

A consideration of the communitarian/liberal debate is relevant not merely because congregations could be considered as example of attempts to build communities but because of the specific nature of the communities suggested by communitiarian thought. At the heart of the communitarian community is the individual as moral agent. I have already established that there are shared assumptions and beliefs about the nature of community by the core membership. However it is clear that members shared certain views on the way in which they had joined their congregations.

Most members described their journeys towards and within the church as processes of individual choice, independent of parental or peer pressure. Where members acknowledged their debt to childhood or adolescent experiences of Christianity they were also aware that their friends and families who shared the same experiences had chosen not to involve themselves in the church. An extension of this well-developed sense of personal choice was the ease with which these church members intertwined their lives and beliefs with the secular world. Few considered it a major source of tension for themselves that their partners were not church members (if this was the case) or that their children were about to leave the church or had already left the church. Most of them acknowledged that the beliefs and values of non-Christians were as valid as their own in that both were a matter of personal and individual integrity. Another aspect of this sentiment seemed to be the celebration of the Church of England as a broad church, a church in which not only a variety of moral and theological beliefs could coexist, but where the very existence of difference could become a principle and source of pride.

Among a group of people where difference of experience, belief and differences in their relationship with the church is a virtue, investigating the existence of any common, overriding, shared identity or the members' understanding of themselves as individuals within the community was problematic. However members did appear to believe that theirs was a very special type of community. Essentially they believed that their community was a moral community, a community that was defined by certain explicit forms of moral behaviour. The focus of the second half of this chapter is an exploration of members' perception of their

community, their understanding of the boundaries between themselves and those outside their community and the nature of their own uniqueness as a community.

A moral community

Most members were aware that their congregations were not communities in a traditional geographical sense. Older members of both churches described pre-Second World War congregations as very specific types of community, that is communities composed of local families. This is in contrast with their modern congregations, which are composed of people who have deliberately chosen to attend that particular church regardless of distance. All members were also aware of the diverse and fragmented nature of their congregations in relation to belief and experience but they identified a common bond amid the difference. They believed they were bound by a shared belief in the importance of morality. However members did not identify particular morals as the element that defined them as a community; even though there was a consensus of opinion on many moral issues, members did not regard this consensus as the chief bond within their community.

Members would often refer to the diverse range of moral opinion in their church where none in fact existed.[10] For the members adhering to a particular set of values was not the defining feature of their community, but commitment to the idea of morality as such was centrally important to it. What made their community distinct was that it was composed of individuals who aimed to live their lives by high moral standards. Further they equated high moral standards with their commitment and active participation in the church.

In some ways the question of what defines a Christian group or how a Christian group defines itself is ridiculous, because the obvious answer is that it defines itself thorough its religious beliefs. Attractive though this answer is in its simplicity it does not allow for the myriad interpretations of Christian belief and practice that exist within Christianity as a world faith,[11] or even within the scope of two average-sized congregations in Kent. Christians who are outside the church and who never worship except on rare occasions share many of the basic religious beliefs. What distinguishes these Christians from their counterparts outside the church is that an essential part of their religious beliefs is their commitment to the church itself.

The members I interviewed believed that in several important aspects their beliefs were significantly different from non-members. The conscious decision to belong, to identify yourself with community was itself often described as a moral choice. Many members were careful to stress that they did not think their religious beliefs were more valid than a Christian who was outside a church, or even that belonging to a church was morally a superior form of behaviour. At the same time they argued that individuals outside the church were more likely to succumb to individualism and become selfish and self-oriented. Church members defined themselves as

individuals who had deliberately chosen to participate in a community, and it was the process of participating that they often described as the essence of their selves as moral beings.

One way in which this was evident in the interviews was that members believed that participation and belonging to something were good things in themselves. Members often spoke of the act of 'joining in', of demonstrating commitment, as a moral virtue. Mina belonged to a group of women who were introduced to St Martin's through their children. She had never been to church, even as child until she decided that she wanted her son to join the cubs. Membership of the cubs involved a once monthly attendance at church in the cubs' parade and Mina first attended in order to watch her son. I asked Mina why she wanted her son to join the cubs in the first place. Mina described how she thought 'it would be good for him to join something and do something regularly'. She compared teaching her son the importance 'doing something regularly' with teaching him not to steal or be dishonest as equally educating him in desirable moral qualities.

Members identified the moral worth of participation in activities beyond their church life. In interviews many members pointed out they were involved in other organisations and in regular charity work. They were also aware that other members of their congregation were members of other groups. The involvement in groups and organisations was always considered virtuous. One woman I interviewed was a local city councillor for the Labour Party. She said that as far as she was aware Labour voters were a minority in her church but that politics was never an issue in her relationship with other members of the congregation. She believed that the party in question was not significant, although 'obviously it's important for me'; the crucial point though was that 'I'm willing to do something about it'.

The understanding of involvement and participation as a moral activity was also reflected in members' attitude to the role of the church in the community. In the interviews I asked people whether they thought the Church of England should be active in the community. Everyone said yes and the majority of core members thought that the church should do more. The reason most people gave was that they thought that in intervening in the community the church was providing a moral example.

The question of participation in the community was one that many members spoke of passionately and forcefully. A reason for this seemed to be that that they equated participation in the community with Christian living. Some members argued that involvement in the community for the church as an institution and for individual members was an essential element of being Christian. Belonging to organisations and commitment were not merely examples of moral behaviour but they were examples of Christian moral behaviour.

'How can you be a Christian and not be involved in the community?', asked the warden of one church. The warden of the other church argued that 'joining in charity work, acting as school

governors, whatever, is a type of moral leadership and if Christians can't show moral leadership who can?'. Another woman interpreted the instruction to 'love your neighbour' as a call to community involvement. Her husband laughed at the thought that 'being a Christian is about looking after your own spirituality'; on the contrary, in his words, 'Christian spirituality is expressed through our duty to others and the community'. Doris was typical in her identification of activity in the community with her faith. She told me that as a child she had been encouraged to 'help others' and that she had continued this practice into her retirement. When I asked her why she was still so active she replied:

> Individuals in the church have a responsibility to become involved in the community, in emulation of Christ, especially about homelessness, it's a scandal. People look at the church and they see it's not doing nearly as much as it could. Well what kind of message does that send people? It tells them that it's acceptable not to do anything, and it's not.

For most members moral integrity was an essential element of their lives as Christians. The community of Christians within each congregation defined themselves as individual moral agents - their morals may have differed from one another but they were joined by the importance they attributed to moral standards and the moral standard they identified was that of participation and commitment.

The Christian individual

The importance of morality as a concept is articulated as passionately by many writers in the church as by the congregations. As outlined earlier in this chapter the broader political and philosophical discussion on community has focused on the individual as an independent moral agent. Parallel debates on morality, and specifically on the importance of morality in itself, have been conducted by Christian writers over a similar period. In an article on the relationship between the work of Christian ethicists and communitarian thought, Gill argues that most 'exponents of Christian ethics today seem to agree that morality has a firm communitarian basis' (Gill, R. 1995: 1). Many of the same themes and issues which arise in the communitarian/liberal discussion are covered by overtly Christian writers but the latter focus specifically on just some of them.

One of the most common themes is the recognition that while morality underpins the Christian community, at the same time the modern fragmented world creates a need, and also hampers and undermines any attempt by Christians, to sustain the ideal of a distinctive moral framework (Porter, J. 1999: 1). Christian academic, David Cook's *The Moral Maze* is an important early intervention into this area. Deliberately popular in tone, *The Moral Maze* (SPCK 1983) is presented by Cook as a user-friendly guide for Christians who want to make moral decisions in a society characterised by alienation futility, individualism, relativism, secularisation and pluralism. Cook intended the book as a guide but it reads as a warning to Christians who are

naive enough to presume that just because the general moral values in society are rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition that Christian morals are pervasive throughout society. His conclusion is that Christians formulating their morals do so as a minority group. Christians live in a post-Christian era (Cook, D. 1983: 43) and in the realm of morality 'Christianity is now one option among many' (Cook, D. 1983:15). The problem for Christians then, is how to distinguish their morals from morality in the rest of society. Cook's answer lies not in the morals themselves, but the manner in which they are derived and the manner in which they are sustained. Cook urges Christians to use the Bible as a source of authority, teaching and tradition to inform their decisions.

The question of authority in the context of Christian morality in a plural age underlies much of the discussion, especially in relation to the way Christians understand their difference from other groups in society. Essentially Cook is asking in what way are moral Christians different from other moral individuals. It is not their morality that distinguishes them, partly because Christians and non-Christians share certain morals but also because there are differences of morality within Christianity itself. His answer is to reaffirm the origins of Christian morality, the Bible.

The theologian, Brian Hebblethwaite in *Ethics and Religion in a Pluralistic Age* begins his analysis of the same problem where Cook ends. He begins by stating that 'the distinctiveness of the Christian way is bound up with and depends upon the truth of Christian doctrine' (Hebblethwaite, B.1997: 97), but then adds that in a world shaped by pluralism and an absence of absolutes, the truth and validity of Christian doctrine must be defended. Hebblethwaite's dilemma is that he wants to centre morality based on doctrine at the heart of Christian identity but he is also aware that the pluralistic age he refers to in the title of his book makes such a project almost untenable. He describes how emotivism undermines every moral standard by reducing it to an opinion and how within Christianity there are a multitude of moralities - or in his words, 'Christianity is not a uniform discipline' (Hebblethwaite, B. 1997: 50).

Although Hebblewaite develops the discussion raised by Cook in *The Moral Maze* he ends with the same problems. He must locate the distinctiveness of Christian identity in doctrine as the only absolute source of authority but then must acknowledge that the characteristic feature of Christian ethics (and not just in the plural age) is that it is inherently flexible.

The question still remains as to the distinctiveness of Christian morality and the Christian moral community. Moral theologian Timothy Sedgewick argues that in the modern period Anglicanism, let alone Christianity more generally, lacks a 'normative, distinctive and adequate moral theology' (Sedgwick, T. 1983: 139). However some Christian thinkers believe that there is a unique and distinctive element to Christian morality (Gustafson, J. 1977: 169). If it does not lie within the morals themselves where does it lie?

Although other theologians from a variety of Christian traditions have addressed this question (Fagan, S. 1997) the work of Gill is especially relevant to this thesis. In a number of his recent books Robin Gill has addressed this question and related issues directly. In *Moral Communities* (1992) and *Moral Leadership in a Postmodern Age* (1997) he broadly examines the origins and significance of Christian morality in the modern world. Gill believes that secular theories cannot adequately explain where goodness, selfless actions and desires come from and that ultimately there is an 'intimate connection between morality and faith, and between both of these and the moral communities that foster and sustain them' (Gill, R. 1992: 13).

Like Cooke and Hebblethwaite, he argues that the genesis of Christian morality lies in doctrine and faith. However Gill is also concerned to explain how that morality becomes tangible - truly distinctive through its nurture and substance in faith communities. His analysis is interesting - especially in relation to the views on community and morality expressed in my data. He maintains that it is possible for religious communities to act as 'moral harbingers even within a fragmented, postmodern world' (Gill, R. 1999:15). More importantly he believes that one reason that religious communities can do this is because the act of community itself acts as a bulwark against secular fragmentation.

This was a view articulated many times in the interviews with the congregations of St Martin's and St Sebastian's. They believe that there is a strong relationship between their identity as Christians, their membership of a church community and their morality.

In *Moral Communities and Moral Leadership in a Postmodern Age*, Gill develops his view that moral communities sustain Christian morality. He points to the fact that Christians are over-represented in voluntary and charity work and concludes that Christian commitment has an impact on moral beliefs. It is here that my data differs from Gill's conclusions. Gill argues that Christian moral communities sustain and nurture particular moral values. Faith communities are moral communities precisely because they are carriers of certain morals. As Gill says of religious communities:

> Even if they do not always exemplify the values they carry, they may still be carriers of values. And these values may still be distinctive and different from those of secular society. (Gill, R. 1992: 15)

From the interviews I conducted I found that although active members of both congregations identified themselves as belonging to a Christian moral community, they did not expect that the morals within their own congregations, let alone the Church of England as a whole to be the same. Within certain boundaries they expected and even celebrated moral diversity as a vital part of a broad church. They were aware of the differences in opinions on certain issues and rarely saw these differences as problematic. Where they did see the differences as problematic it was in

cases where one group within the church was perceived as imposing its morals on the rest of the church/congregation and not allowing moral diversity to flourish.

It is possible that what Gill is referring to as morals and my use of the word are not strictly comparable. Even taking into account the possible differences in definition, one difference is clear. While Gill believes that Christian moral communities convey certain morals, the majority of Christians I interviewed believed that it was the act of belonging, their commitment to the church, that made their community a moral one. Although other studies of the church show that fellowship can be based on a number of factors (Thompson, R. 1957: 36), in the two churches I studied the fellowship of members was founded on the commitment of members to their church.

The central value that the Christian moral communities of St Martin's and St Sebastian's sustained and nurtured was that of commitment to the church. When interviewees distinguished themselves from other members of the congregation it was never on the basis of belief or particular morals but always on the level and degree of commitment to the church. I found, as did Gill, that church membership did influence belief. However the beliefs it appeared to influence most strongly in my data, were not to do with moral values (although there is a relationship between active membership and liberal views), but beliefs about the nature of the church and the value of commitment itself.

The essential nature of these communities, as their members understood them, was participation in and commitment to the church. This is reflected in their evaluation of their membership. For the majority of members, the significance of their commitment to the church is that it demands their participation and involvement. The essential nature of their communities is further reflected in the way they understood the boundaries between their community and those outside their community. If it is the case that boundaries help to define the community, (Crow, G. and Allan, G. 1994: 177, and Bauman, Z. 1990: 54) then commitment, as it is expressed through participation and involvement, is integral to the communities of St Martin's and St Sebastian's.

Since commitment acts as the boundary between those within and those outside the community it also becomes the point, the very focus of the community itself, the defining difference between those who belong to the community and those who remain outside (Jenkins, R. 1996: 121). This is why core-members consistently explained the difference between themselves and other Christians outside the church in terms of what they did rather of what they believed. Although differences in belief were important they were subservient and sometimes even dismissed by comparison to the difference in practice. Theirs were not communities of belief but of commitment.

Just as core members identified participation within the community as an expression of Christian morality, they identified the membership of a church as a distinctive moral activity. The particular form of morality that they felt defined their community was that they were members

of a church. Church membership and the responsibilities that entailed, attendance at regular services, participation in various church-based activities, tithing, assuming responsibilities for the running and maintenance of the church and allowing worship to be organised through the church were the aspects of the morality they identified with their community.

This was evident in core members' attitudes towards the structures and rituals of the church. While non-core members would sometimes describe the demands of church membership as burdensome, core members spoke of those same demands with affection and a sense of personal pride. Prayer was cited as a discipline imposed by membership that core members believed was a moral act.

In my interview with Florence we discussed the difference between churched and unchurched Christians. Like the majority of other members I spoke to Florence insisted that Christians who went to church were not necessarily better people than those who thought they could be Christians without going to church. Although she repeated that both types of Christians were equal, she was equally adamant that there were important differences between the two, and that these differences impinged on the quality of the faith.

When I asked her to give me an example she chose prayer. She asked me if I had heard of people saying that they could talk to God any time they wanted and that God would listen to them, and that they didn't need to go to church at a certain time every Sunday to do this. When I said that I had heard this many times Florence shrugged her shoulders as if this was explanation enough. After several minutes of cajoling on my part I persuaded her to be explicit and explain the differences to me:

> Those people are right. When you pray, wherever you are, God will hear you. If you need God he will always listen to you. But what kind of relationship do you have with God? A relationship that is on your terms; when you want it; when you happen to need it. When I go to church or go to a Cursillo group I've made a commitment to God that I will speak to him at a certain time whether I need to or not. I don't dictate my relationship to God and it's not governed by my needs. You can't use God just when you feel like it. Well you can but is that the way to show your love to God?

Although Florence was originally reluctant to explain her opinion of the differences between churched and non-churched Christians her example of prayer clearly illustrated the differences between the two. Florence believed that her commitment to regular prayer at specific times indicated selflessness and discipline. In turn that discipline was indicative of the strength of her love for God and her commitment to the church. People who did not make that commitment were showing no discipline, their prayer was selfish as only their needs and not God's dictated it. It was prayer but, in the opinion of Florence, it was merely a cry for help and was devoid of moral worth.

Core members gave other examples of why they considered their commitment to a church was a moral activity. Perhaps the most explicit way in which members indicated this was in their insistence that membership of a church was a conscious choice on their part. In one sense this was evident from the results of the questionnaire. In reply to the question 'If for some reason your church was shut down would you join another church?', 81% said 'Yes, I would immediately find another church in my area'. Similarly in response to the question 'What is the major reason you continue to involve yourself in the life of the church?', most people said 'This type of activity enables me to show my commitment and love for God'.

There was a sense that their membership of a church was a moral choice in itself. Core members described the process of their involvement in the church as one where they took a personal decision to join. Some aspects of their interpretation of their membership of the church as an individual choice have been discussed in the chapter on the Significance of Commitment. Members generally rejected the idea that their membership was the result of parental or peer pressure. They tended to be especially hostile to the idea that their membership was in any way driven by their enjoyment of the social aspects of church life.

The different views on a range of different moral issues within the church as a whole bore no relation to the cohesion of their particular community. Gill argues very persuasively that there is a shared morality within the Christian churchgoing community, that 'there are broad patterns of Christian beliefs, teleology and altruism which distinguish churchgoers as a whole from non-churchgoers' (Gill, R. 1999: 197). The conclusion from my research is that if Gill is right, and they share a common morality this is *not* how they perceive and, more importantly, this is not how they experience their community. The only form of morality that they identified with as a common expression of their community was that of belonging to and participating in their church. The boundary between themselves and non-churchgoers was composed not of beliefs but of behaviour.

Although my analysis of the nature of the moral consensus within two congregations at least differs from Gill's there is evidence that within the church more generally there is no consensus around particular moral values. This last factor is significant because members believed that there was no moral consensus within the church, and, as I discussed in the chapters 'The Changed Church' and 'The Communication of Commitment', they felt this lack of consensus was unimportant.

Moral diversity and the church

Other writers have also found that congregations, as moral or faith communities, are not necessarily bound by a common morality (Rodd, C. ed. 1995). Given the fragmented, pluralistic nature of society and of the Church of England, it would be surprising if there was a consistency

of moral opinion within the Church of England. Members of a congregation are as likely to be a part of the world that rejects absolutes and is sympathetic towards relativism as individuals outside the church. Yet for some writers this is a false tension because, in the first place, there is no absolute distinction between religious and secular morality (Hicks, D. 1996: 22). Secondly, secular trends and preoccupations have invaded the church and are as influential in the internal thinking of the church as they are in the rest of society. It is the impact of these trends, especially in the realm of morality, that leads to as great a degree of relativism inside the church as outside it (Goodlife, P. 1998: 91).

In *Postmodernity: Christian Identity in a Fragmented Age*, the theologian Paul Lakeland notes that Christian thinking is always a part of the wider concerns within society and that, therefore, the postmodern sentiment which is 'nonsequential, non-eschatological, non-utopian, non-systematic, non-foundational and ultimately non-political' (Lakeland, P. 1997: 8) is now a part of the postmodern Christian sensibility. According to Lakeland the postmodern sensibility impinges on Christianity and Christian identity in a variety of ways. One manifestation of the postmodern in Christianity is that within the church Christians feel free to choose those elements of doctrine and belief they prefer and to reject those they dislike. This is true for morality as it is for particular styles of worship (Lakeland, P. 1997: 59), and it was a phenomenon that was certainly confirmed by the evidence in my data.

Church members had clearly chosen to attend their particular churches for particular reasons (aesthetic beauty, style of worship, its community etc.) but also because they associated certain moral outlooks with other Anglican congregations in the area. As a consequence of the unease that church members felt with the idea of moral absolutes, members chose churches where they felt comfortable. But they also celebrated their moral relativism as a virtue, especially when compared with ideas from the past which they viewed as oppressive, narrow and out of place in a broad church. Lakeland argues that this approach to morality is just as pervasive inside as outside the church:

> For many postmodern individuals, non-Christian and Christian alike, Christian moral authority has for too long championed destructive and oppressive versions of reality. For all these reasons and more, the moral authority of the Christian community in the postmodern world is limited among Christians and almost non-existent outside them. (Lakeland, P. 1997: 4)

Among the members I interviewed there were few signs that they mourned the passing of previous moral standards, although it is clear that for some Christian writers moral relativism within the church is an uncomfortable and even unacceptable phenomenon.[12] Some writers argue that the appearance of relativism hides hidden absolutes that undermine the spread of relativism.[13]

The acceptance of moral relativism by both congregations could be one reason why it was the act of belonging to a community that was celebrated as a moral decision and regarded as moral behaviour. The widespread belief among lay members and some commentators that a return to the past is not possible means that the Church of England and its existing congregations must find new ways of identifying themselves as communities.

Not only was the absence of a consensus on moral issues in relation to personal conduct, sexuality, divorce, and so on, not seen as negative but, in the eyes of core members, it was linked with their perception that belonging was a positive moral attribute. Although members accepted moral diversity as an aspect of a broad church, they were also aware that this diversity could be detrimental to the stability of the church. Some members had had personal experience of churches where tensions between different groups had lead to fragmentation within the congregation. Other members spoke angrily of media calls on church figures to support moral absolutes.

Members' anger was reserved for the response of the press and their perception of the public's attitude to the discussion. Core members spoke despairingly of what they saw as the narrow-mindedness of the media. However they were also angry at what they saw as the attempt to force church leaders to support an absolute position on homosexuality, to either condemn or condone it. They interpreted such attempts as divisive, as a pronouncement either way would alienate sections within the church and possible members outside the church. Members were also angry that people continually misunderstood the nature of their community. The warden of one church went as far as to attribute this different understanding of the church to core and non-core members. While outsiders, the press and church members on the periphery of the congregation, wanted the church to denounce publicly on some issues, core members interpreted the role of the church very differently:

> We are not called to judge, that's not what we're here for, although some people would like to I'm sure. We're here to show our commitment to God. We do that through our church and our commitment to our church, we don't do it by blaming and judging.

Members believed that just as moral absolutes in cases of personal morality were divisive the morality of commitment was a unifying force. Although members usually argued that moral diversity was an acceptable or even positive development within the church they were also aware that such diversity could be a source of tension or conflict. The belief in the significance of church membership as a form of moral behaviour, and the importance of commitment as an expression of faith, were central to the cohesion of the community.

In this sense the Church of England as a whole is not a moral community in that the morals of individuals or even of congregations are shared. In the past, the leadership of the church may have called for a return to shared morals but in the recent period, even as it has criticised itself

for not establishing clear moral positions it has acknowledged the impossibility of doing so.[14] In the case of the two congregations, I investigated the significance of commitment and membership were at the heart of the communities' moral consensus. Theirs was a moral community, but it was a community whose focus was the celebration and desire to strengthen the idea and ritual of belonging and commitment itself. The question remains that, if community is bound by the idea of commitment and the importance of belonging, how is such a community organised?

The organisation of a moral community

The challenge of organising a church where a variety of moral and theological beliefs coexists has been discussed by many churches (Goodlife, P. 1998: 108). In 1977 the World Council of Churches discussed the issue of religion and community. As a result of this conference, *Faith in the Midst of Faiths* was published, a collection of essays on the nature of Christian community. In the opening essay the Director of the Dialogue programme of the World Council of Churches, S. J. Samertha asks several questions which relate to the notion of congregations as moral communities. He notes that 'the visible boundaries of traditional religious communities are breaking down' (Samertha, J. 1977: 12) yet any attempt by religious groups to reaffirm their distinctiveness, to restate their difference or to 'guard the identity' of their communities, is likely to result in religious communities becoming 'ghetto(s) living in stifled isolation' (Samertha, J. 1977: 13).

His primary question is how can Christian groups retain a distinctive identity without dogma and doctrine? His answer is that all communities need rules and principles but rules and principles must change if a community is to survive in a changed situation. (Samertha, J. 1977: 30). In some ways the Church of England both nationally and in relation to the congregations of St Martin's and St Sebastian's have addressed this question. One way it has tried to distinguish itself as a community is through its organisation, and the nature of the relationships between the laity and between the laity and the leadership.

In the case of the congregations I examined core members identified their activities within the church as the defining feature of their membership of the church. Their regular attendance, the tasks they performed, their involvement in various groups and their participation in committees and communal rites and practices were identified as the key elements in their community. They defined their faith through their active commitment and they regarded their commitment as moral. As such what they did and the opportunities the church provided for their involvement and the involvement of others were valued as significant areas in the life of the church and the 'backbone' of their community.

The importance the membership attributed to these activities is echoed in the debates on community and commitment within the church as a whole.

The involvement of the laity in the running of local churches is not strictly a post-Second World War phenomenon. However the level and nature of lay involvement in the church is of a qualitatively different character from the end of the Second World War.[15] Today the active laity do more in the church, they know more about the running and organisation of the church, they are involved in decision-making and they share some of the responsibility for the continued survival of many congregations.

It would be misleading to identify this increased activity on the part of the laity as the most important change in the laity in the modern Church of England. The most important development must be that today the participation of the laity is the defining feature of the local Christian community. No longer united by their beliefs, they are instead bound by their commitment to the organisation of the church. The church itself has identified this phenomenon and recognised the central importance of the involvement of the laity in the survival of the church as a community.

The prioritisation of the active role of the laity in the church has been a gradual process for both the leadership and the laity. As early as 1953 leading ministers in the church recognised that the Church of England was faced with several difficulties. The membership of the church was declining and the first signs of secularisation - the church, religious symbols and rituals becoming less important in society and the declining legitimacy of the parochial system - were evident (Ranson, S. and Bryman, A. and Hinings, B. 1977: 100). There was another factor which the leadership of the church found even more alarming - the whole concept of public worship, collective belonging and participation was questioned by church members who left the church and even by some who stayed.

In 1969 the General Synod introduced a measure whereby the laity were 'to have their place in every aspect of Church government, including the doctrine and services of the church' (Synodical Govt. and the Parish. COI. 1969: 3). In 1971 the Advisory Council for the Church's Ministry described a vast number of occupations and duties that were open to the lay (The Professional Lay Ministry in the Church of England).

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s the laity found themselves encouraged to participate in the life of the church and there was a move to modernise ritual in an attempt to make the church a more accessible environment. The moves to involve the laity were coupled with a growing belief that the involvement of the laity was to be a defining feature of the Church of England. While in 1953 the church was keen to remind the laity that their primary duty was regular attendance at church (Church Assembly Publications: 1953: 9), by 1968, it was concerned with recommending provinces and dioceses 'to encourage, train, equip and send out lay people for evangelism and ministry' (Coleman, R. 1992: res 42.).

In *Worship in the Church of England*, the theologians D. E. W. Harrison and Michael C. Sansom argue that the new levels of laity involvement, especially in the service, through the ASB reflect the fact that within the church 'the congregation is viewed in a different light' (Harrison, D. and Sansom, M. 1992: 127). Harrison and Sansom note that the church needed to make membership genuinely corporate. In the absence of shared values or beliefs, this corporateness is underpinned by activities which foster the spirit of corporate identity - the Alternative Service Book, the Peace and the 'first person plural form of the Nicene Crede' (Harrison, D. and Sansom, C. 1992: 128). They conclude that these measures are not just about modernisation but that they flow from a new understanding of the church itself.

The emphasis on participation as the key to community has contributed to a number of other developments. One is the growth of non-stipendiary ministry. Although the idea of unpaid ministers has been encouraged by the decline in the numbers of individuals who offer themselves for ordination,[16] there are other less pragmatic reasons for the growth.[17] Some of the leadership of the Church of England[18] believes that the lay are 'more in touch' with the secular world. This is a sentiment that was discussed in the area of evangelism - but it is a belief that has also informed the warmth with which the church has welcomed non-stipendiary ministers.

A second reason is that the decline in people offering for ordination is only a part of the equation. It seems that there has also been an increase in the lay who wish to volunteer. argue that this may be because the lay no longer regard the paid ministry with the same awe and respect that they did in the past. It is not that the lay hold the ministry in disrespect, but rather that they regard themselves with high esteem. Many of the lay consider their skills and abilities equal to that of their ministers. On the issue of ultimate authority within a church, the lay often consider themselves, or fellow members of the lay, to be the equal of the ministers. (Lawton, G. 1989: 15)

This was certainly true in the congregations of St Martin's and St Sebastian's. I have discussed this aspect of the perception of the laity in the chapter on the data but it is worth noting that high esteem in relation to the minister was consistent among the core membership. Although members who were less active were more likely to hold the minister in awe or respect, it did seem that there was a relationship between the level of commitment and the level of self-esteem on the part of the member.

The attitude towards the priest and the participation of core members was linked in other ways. It seemed as though members judged their priest partly on his ability to play a cohering role in the community. A priest who was unable to facilitate members' desire to participate in the running of the church or who was unable to support the structures that bound the congregation together was not judged sympathetically.

One feature both congregations had in common was that their vicars were relatively new. Members of St. Cosmos and Damien on the Blean were hopeful that their vicar would participate in their community. Many of them barely knew him; he was in the process of joining the congregation as I first asked the congregation for permission to use their church in my research. Although some members' contact with the new vicar was minimal, they all spoke warmly of him and of his perceived skill as a coordinator of their community.

The vicar of St Martin's had been with his congregation for longer but was still relatively new, especially compared to his predecessor who had held his position for eight years. When I first began talking to members from St Martin's I was originally confused by their references to the vicar. I finally worked out that many of the core members were actually referring to the previous vicar rather than the present incumbent. The reason for their continual references to the past vicar was their unhappiness with their new vicar's perceived ability to develop the tradition of involvement and participation within the church. Core members spoke of his 'coldness', his 'aloofness' and his attempts to 'interfere' in the established mechanisms for running the church.

The two congregations displayed very different feelings towards their respective vicars but their criteria for the judgement of the vicars was the same. We know that congregations have traditionally employed different standards in relation to their attitudes towards their vicars (Thompson, R. 1956: 34). But it is interesting that two congregations who value laity participation should employ the same standards.

In the modern Church of England the laity participate in services, the organisation of the church and now constitute at least a third of its ordained ministry (Sunday Times. 29. 10.95). In itself this is a radical and fundamental change in the role and relationship of the laity to the life of the church. Coupled with this development is the conscious integration of the laity into strategies for survival of the church.

An example of this focus is the analysis of the life of the church presented in the Report of Rochester's Commission on the Mission of the Church in the Diocese, published in 1997. The focus of the report is the significance of the laity, their role, their importance, and their responsibility for the future success of the church. It begins by acknowledging the debt the diocese owes its lay. Of the 40,000 adult ministers in the diocese, 'the vast majority are lay or honorary' (Report of Rochester's Commission ,1997:4), and that figure is expected to increase in the next 10 years. The report argues that consequently 'the development of lay ministry is one of the most important tasks facing the church at present' (Report of Rochester's Commission ,1997:4). The report also argues that the involvement of the laity has contributed to a sense of 'Christian brotherhood' and that the community is to a large extent validated by the degree it sustains and nurtures the activity of the lay (Report of Rochester's Commission ,1997:7).

In the two congregations I examined this new equality between the lay and the ministry was already a reality in one important respect. The core members of the congregation perceived their contribution to the church to be of equal value to the contribution of their respective ministers. The minister was the head of their community but it was a leadership defined by its organisational duties rather than its religious or spiritual implications. In the moral community shaped by participation it was inevitable that the head of that community should be valued not for his religiosity or spiritual insights but for his ability to organise a community that facilitated their participation.

The theologian Robin Greenwood develops this idea in *Practising Community*. He suggests the development of local ministry teams as a way of organising the church to meet the challenges presented by the Decade of Evangelism, teams which support the church, but which only function as long as lay and ordained work together. He goes on to describe the evolution of a laity who are aware of themselves as *subject*, rather than simply the *object* of ministry and the need for 'opportunities being developed for laity, together with readers and clergy to engage in the whole spectrum of the churches mission' (Greenwood, R. 1996: 64).

Belief in belonging

In the scenario described by Greenwood the lay are not only active in the life of the church, but at the congregational level their commitment and participation becomes the purpose and identity of the congregation itself. The possible transformation of the lay into the *subject* also impinges on the role and significance of the clergy, and ultimately of the leadership of the church. If the role of the ministry was to lead, guide and, through its theological and pastoral skills, minister to its congregations and potential members of its congregations, what is its role when there is no longer an *object* within the church?

The role of core members as subject within the congregation also characterises the nature of their community and their commitment. Their role as subject informs the substance of their relationships with one another as well as their relationship to the church. Theirs is a community which they believe they have constructed through their own commitment and sense of responsibility. It is a community that is governed by individuals belief in the importance of belonging. The values that members ascribe to community and its absence are reminiscent of the values used by classical sociologists to describe community, but unlike the community posited by the classical tradition it is formed through the will of individuals rather than through broader social forces.

However it would also be misleading to suggest that the communities experienced by members are the communities suggested by communitarian writings. The idea of the individual as a moral agent suggested by communitarian writers and the belief that they are independent moral agents was one area of similarity. Members share some of the presumptions about the advantages of

community are proposed by writers like Taylor or Walzer. Taylor's argument that individualism and materialism fosters a sense of powerlesness was endorsed by the members I interviewed. (Taylor, C. in Dayly, M. 1996: 55) However the communities to which members belonged are the product of their actions. In *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* Sandel explicitly argues against the ideas that individuals can choose their community, that genuine communities are the product of 'voluntaristic' action (Sandel, M. 1987: 161). Similary Sanders argues that individuals can not choose the communities to which they belong, they can only choose to be committed them (Bell, D. 1993: 4). Members' belief that they consciously chose the community to which they belong appears to contradict a central theme in communitain writing on the nature of community.

The transformation of sections of the laity into subject or agency rather than object appears to have more in common with the self aware, self seeking individuals described by Bauman in his work on the nature of postmodernity (Bauman, Z. 1998: 66). Bauman suggests that in world without absolutes or community individuals will seek answers and solace in New Religious Movements or new expressions of religiosity (Beckford, J. 1996: 32). However my research suggests that while core members shared the demographic characteristics typical of the Church of England, their self understanding, identity and relationships to one another shared many of the features more commonly associated with newer forms of religious expression. As Heelas has noted in his work on the nature of New Age beliefs, the dynamics that inform the New Age are not confined to definable boundaries but pervade all aspects of society (Heelas, P. 1998: 3).

The hostility of members to absolutes of any form, their reluctance to proselytise, their celebration of difference, and their belief that their commitment is an individual choice are all attributes that are more easily understood within the framework of new expressions of religiosity. The relationships between members and ministers are flexible and negotiable, and the relationship between members and the church itself are determined by the will and demands of the member.

It would not be legitimate within the structure of a case study to argue that a group was representative of a particular trend in society. It would also be illegitimate in this case to make historical comparisons as this was not a focus of the study. However the attempt to identify certain characteristics and to understand them within a modern context is a useful approach because it allows the researcher to explore all aspects of the subject in a way that is both flexible and nuanced. In my introduction I suggested that the congregations I studied were not merely remnants from the past but sociologically significant in some way.

My research suggests that their significance is in the way aspects of traditional and more contemporary forms of community are intertwined. At the same time features of mainstream religion and new expressions of religiosity, traditional relationships and relationships based on more modern premises are also synthesised to form an organisation that looks traditional and

conventional but is in reality nothing of the sort. Core members attend a service on a Sunday and listen to a sermon but they believe that their views and beliefs are as significant as anything they hear in the pulpit. The vicar is still the chair of the parochial council but core members regard him as a facilitator to their community rather than their leader. The commitment of members to the church is often intense and maintained over decades but members believe they would be justified in leaving if for some reason the church failed to meet their needs. They share their commitment with others in their community, they still worship in a group but they believe that their membership is a personal matter, private and often unique to them. The shared element of their membership does not revolve around their beliefs as Christians but in their belonging.

Conclusion

The debate between communitarians and liberals provides further insights into the nature of commitment and community amongst core members. The emphasis on the individual as a moral agent who assumes responsibility for the society in which he lives is echoed by members belief that they are moral agents who do assume this responsibility for the maintenance of their community. However it is not legitimate to make a comparison between the community posited by communitarian writers and the community in which members participated. The tension between the idea that individuals must act to participate in a community and the belief that we all grounded in a pre-existing community in communitarian thought is not a part of the experience of members.

For members the belief that they had chosen to belong and often had to overcome personal challenges in order to participate was an important part of their understanding of their commitment to the church. It is the individual nature of their belonging and their commitment to moral diversity that provides a further insight into the nature of their communities. The congregations are communities defined by behaviour, by the actuality of participation and belonging. Members not only take pride in the extent of their commitment to the church but they distinguish between themselves as a community and those outside the community on the basis of participation in the church.

The nature of their communities are reminiscent of modern forms of religious identity and belonging in that diversity and individual behaviour is celebrated. Members do not believe that their communities are characterised by shared beliefs or morals other than that belonging. The significant element of their membership is that as individuals they have chosen to belong. Not only do they believe in the significance of belonging but their relationship to their congregation or the church more broadly is based on their desire to participate and to maintain their communities.

[1] One of the ways in which the communitarian/liberal discourse has entered the political debate is in the discussion over the place of welfare and the rights and responsibilities of people in society. An example of this is the ongoing discussion in America over welfare reform. In 1993, in an interview with the magazine *Newsweek*, Hilary Clinton claimed that she had been one of the first people to talk about the relationship between rights and responsibilities. (Newsweek. 15.2.1993)

[2] As it exists today the origins of the debate between communitarians and liberals are located in the response to Rawl's *A Theory of Justice* published in1971. Other key texts that define the liberal side of the debate are Ronald Dawkin's *Taking Rights Seriously* (1978), Robert Nozick's *Anarchy State and Utopia* (1977) and Bernard Crick's *In Defence of Politics* (1962) (Arthur, J. 2000: 9). Not only do most most liberals work within the theoretical framework established by Rawls but most communitarian writers also refer to the arguments established by Rawls in his book (Bell, D. 1993: 2).

[3] Some commentators have noted that MacIntyre's vision is most obviously influenced by his favourable impression of feudal Europe (Frazer, E. and Lacey, N. 1993: 163).

[4] Sociologist of religion, Bryan Turner argues that although sociology has failed to contribute to the sociology of rights and community, the communitarian critique of individualism is already implicit in the body of much mainstream sociology (Turner, B. 1995: 5).

[5] In *The Politics of Community* E. Frazer argues that communitarianism is not a crystalised tradition around defined aims. Rather it is a coincidence of apparent interests focused around their hostility towards the effects of modernity. This explains why communitarian writers are from both left and conservative traditions.(Frazer, E and Lacey, N. 1993: 101).

[6] The veil of ignorance is the system invented by Rawls to determine the ideal social system. He argues that if we can identify the type of social contract we would agree to from behind a veil of ignorance, then that arrangement is a just and morally desirable one (Rawls, 1971: 61).

[7] Muhall and Swift note that not only are the ideas at the heart of *A Theory of Justice* flexible and open to interpretation but Rawls himself has published a series of articles after *A Theory of Justice* 'that seem to change the way in which he would have us understand his position' (Mulhall, S and Swift, A. 1992: 1).

[8]Mulhall and Swift argue that the emphasis on the culturally specific nature of morality is Walzer's specific contribution to the communitarian critique of liberalism (Mulhall, S. and Swift, A.1992: 139).

[9] A recurring criticism of communitarian writings is that they imply the use of force as a mechanism for ensuring the sanctity of communal bonds. Some communitarian writers are sensitive to this criticism and argue that force and state intervention would only be used as a last resort (Hirst, P. 1994: 202).

[10] The range of beliefs on moral issues is examined in more detail in the chapter 'The Changed Church'.

[11] The theologian, Ian Markham argues that in the postmodern world Christianity itself is composed of many strands but that it must recognise the diversity of beliefs both inside and outside of its own tradition (Markham, I. 1996: 170).

[12] It does seem to be the case that the mood is more strongly sympathetic towards diversity and tolerance within the church. Even in church reports the Church often finds it difficult to assert absolutism of belief. *In Believing in the Church*, the report of the Doctrine Commission of the Church of England, the church stressed the corporate nature of worship but at the same time the personal and the individual contribution to faith as still important. (*Believing in the Church*: 1981: 60).

[13] In 1996 the Archbishop of Canterbury launched a 'moral crusade in the classroom'. He argued that moral relativism was dangerous because it 'weakens our sense of common ideals and our very capacity to work together for the common good'. However in the speech to the House of Lords he argued that the existence of relativised morality was exaggerated. He pointed to the outrage provoked by the Dunblane tragedy as proof that there were common moral standards in society (Telegraph. 5.7.1996).

[14] A report produced by the Church of England Doctrine Commission, *We Believe in God* notes that not only do the majority of active lay members have a wide range of theological beliefs but that their views on moral issues is just as diverse. It notes that this diversity of beliefs applies to all sections of the church, including the ministry and that attempts to impose homogeneity would be destructive and self defeating. (*We Believe in God*, (1987) Church of England Doctrine Commission, London: Church House Publishing. In the same year the Board of Social Responsibility published a pamphlet *Changing Britain: Social Diversity and Moral Clarity* in which it both recognised to strenghten the moral basis of its theology and the difficulties in doing so.

[15] The Bishop of Grimsby described the average Sunday congregation as 'woefully ignorant of the tasks and duties, the responsibilities of the church'. (Church Councils at Work. 1935: 9 Press and Publications Board Church House)

[16] Bid to Halt trend in Ordinands (CT. 6.1.89).

[17] In the *Sunday Times,* the religious affairs correspondent Victoria Streatfield argued that one reason the church welcomed unpaid ministers was because the Church Commissioners had lost £800m (29.10.95).

[18] The Archbishop of York voiced his reservations about the role of the laity in the church. He affirmed the key role of the laity in decision-making but he also stressed that despite their more intimate knowledge of the secular world they are not theologians. (CT. 1.2.87)

Chapter 9

Conclusion

The British sociological tradition has continued to ignore the religious mainstream. While congregational studies has expanded, its interest is mostly American, where mainstream religion plays a different role to that which it plays in Britain. The reason for the sociological disinterest is not hard to understand. During the four years it has taken me to write my thesis every Easter has been followed by figures showing that the number of communicants in the Church of England has fallen and the presence of the church in public life has continued to diminish.

Parallel to the decline in the membership and status of the church is the continued growth of practices and beliefs associated with the New Age. Belief in New Age ideas has grown as membership and participation in rites of passage organised by the church has diminished. A greater percentage of the population now believes in fortune telling than in Jesus as the Son of God (Gill, R. 1999: 128). It is not surprising that sociologists should be engaged by the opportunities presented to them by these developments to study the forms of human behaviour and belief represented by the New Age.

The sociological interest in religion is not only unevenly distributed between the mainstream and unorthodox expressions of religion but some sociologists have gone so far as to argue that where participation in the mainstream survives it represents nothing more than a hangover from the past. In other words membership of the Church of England has no contemporary significance other than as a collection of traditions and practices that may take years to die out.

It is this last point which is the starting point of my research. Although the theories and critiques of mainstream religion in the contemporary period developed by Davie, Bruce and Gill informed my understanding of the Church of England, my first premise was the possibility that there was some sociological significance to the membership of a mainstream church.

In some ways the work of Davie and Gill directly influenced the focus of my study. In *Religion in Britain* Davie stresses that the decline in the participation of mainstream churches is part of the wider decline of participation throughout society, and in *Churchgoing and Christian Ethics* Gill argues that as communities Christian congregations are unique in some way. My aim was to discover why the individuals in two congregations continued to participate and commit themselves to an institution when participation more generally was declining. Similarly Gill's argument that churchgoers were distinct communities informed my own desire to investigate the nature of that distinctiveness.

As a case study, rather than an attempt to develop a general theory of churchgoing my objectives were to explore the nature of the relationships between the laity and more specifically to

examine the nature of the congregations as communities and their understanding of their commitment to the church. My research indicated that at least in the case of the two congregations I examined, members of the church participated for specific reasons and that there were common themes in relation to their understanding of their commitment and their community. It seemed that while decline may be the defining feature of many Church of England congregations, the individuals who remain are not merely the remnants of a past and outmoded tradition, but that their actions and beliefs are significant of something specific in the modern context. If this is the case then it would be illegitimate for sociologists to assume that the people who populate the Church of England today are merely the same people as those who attended church when Thompson conducted his research into the church in 1957.

Secondly, my research suggested that, Gill is right to identify churchgoers as distinctive communities. Gill argues that congregations are moral communities; they are communities that can be distinguished by shared moral outlooks and moral behaviour. I found that as communities the members of both congregations defined themselves through their commitment to participation in the church. I found that they perceived themselves as a group which shared a belief in belonging.

As a group the core members of the two congregations were demographically similar and shared many of the same religious and moral beliefs. However the beliefs that bound them as a community were not concerned with personal morality but with their actions and behaviour as church members. They understood and defined their commitment to the church as one that was expressed through the time and energy of their involvement with the church and the importance they attributed to their membership.

The two congregations were defined by a belief in belonging in a number of ways. In the questionnaires and in the interviews I collected information that related to a variety of areas to do with the different aspects of members' understanding of their congregations, of their relationships with each other and of their relationship with the church more generally. As I conducted my research and began to analyse my data I found that a number of themes persistently reappeared. These themes not only provided the structure to the body of my thesis but they represent the key elements of what the congregations as communities bound by a belief in belonging actually means.

The first of these themes is members understanding of the church itself. The perception of the church shared by members was an important factor in unravelling the nature of members' commitment because it served as a starting point to understanding what it was they were committed to. Although many core members were ambiguous about the Established character of the Church of England they were broadly in favour of Establishment. Members believed that without an Established church a Christian voice would be excluded from important areas of public life like education, the media and political discussions on a whole range of issues.

Although members felt there were many disadvantages associated with Establishment they thought that the disadvantages associated with disestablishment were greater.

While some members were unclear about the exact nature of Establishment, all members were conscious of the changing nature of the church. This was a significant point in as much that members thought that the church was becoming more sensitive and liberal. Moreover they approved of these changes. Many older members could personally remember the Church of England as an institution that commanded more respect within society, when dogma was more important, ecumenism was rare and regular church attendance was evidence of good character and respectability. Without exception members spoke of this past manifestation of the Church of England in negative terms.

Members interpreted the liberalisation of the church as 'civilised' and 'up to date'. They saw the absence of pressure to attend church as a positive development because it meant that only people who really wanted to attend did so, and that although the pews may be sparsely populated they were no longer packed with people who didn't want to be there.

Throughout discussions on the nature of the church, members never described the church in terms of religious beliefs. They continually distinguished their church from other churches on the basis of style of worship, organisation and levels of tolerance towards diversity. They repeatedly referred to the Church of England as a 'broad church.' A broad church was one where a range of beliefs and religious practices were not only tolerated but celebrated. Members frequently spoke with pride of the levels of tolerance and the extent of diversity within their church. Similarly they spoke dismissively of other Christian traditions especially Catholicism and evangelism precisely because they were not broad churches.

In relation to their particular membership of a church, members from both churches expressed very specific definitions of the churches they belonged to. They referred to it both as something universal and as something very specific to them. When they spoke about belonging to a church they were referring to the church as a body of Christians. However when I asked them about their membership of a church, it was apparent that they were not committed to the church more broadly or even to the Church of England, rather they were committed to the particular church to which they already belonged.

In the questionnaires members indicated that they could think of no reason why they would ever leave the church. However in the interviews many of them described how they had frequently left churches to find one they felt they belonged to. In relation to the question of what it was that members were committed to, they were committed to the church they were members of rather than the broader church. It appeared that the most positive reason for their attendance and commitment to that particular church was that it allowed them to participate as members and that they considered those churches to be communities.

Just as members' definition and understanding of their church was based on the significance they placed on belonging and participation, so the basis of their membership was also based on the importance of their active commitment to the church.

The importance of a belief in belonging in the formation of their community is seen in the significance which members attributed to their commitment to a church. The most distinctive feature about their idea of commitment is that members consistently defined it in terms of behaviour and action rather than belief. They argued that commitment to a church involved regular contact with a church and a sense of responsibility in relation to the organisation of the church.

I asked members how important membership of a church was to their faith. Without exception core members said that commitment to the church was an essential element of their Christianity. They differentiated between Christians who were committed to a church and those who were not. Although they were always very careful to stress that they did not think that they were a better type of Christian because of their membership of a church, they were adamant that church and non-church Christians represented two different types of Christianity.

Effectively core members believed that the faith of Christians who were not members of a church was not as substantial as their own because it was subject to the corrosive pressures of the secular world and lacked the protection that belonging to a church afforded. Without the advantages of belonging to a church, faith would diminish and fade or become some thing qualitatively different from what it once was. Membership of a church not only reinforced faith, but it was its bedrock, the foundation that made faith both possible and meaningful.

Although the relationship between belief and behaviour is one of constant debate within sociology, for church members the real nature of the relationship was defined by the primacy they gave to belonging and participation in the church. It was possible to be a member of a church and not be a 'real Christian'. However if you never joined a church there was no possibility that individuals could make the transition from nominal or folk Christian to a Christian that was part of a community.

The significance which members attributed to their commitment to the church was reflected in their attitude to the responsibilities, time and energy that commitment entailed. Core members were partly identified not only by how frequently they attended church, but also by the fact that they typically held one or more responsibilities within the church. The detail provided by the interviews gave a more complex picture about the way members understood their commitment to the church. The majority of the responsibilities were extremely time consuming, sometimes involving training, sometimes involving one or two evenings' work a week and a substantial amount of paperwork.

A further factor was that members often carried out their responsibilities despite pressures of family or work. For some members their commitment to the church meant leaving children or husbands or sacrificing valuable time. However the competition between family, work and church commitments appeared not be experienced as a tension. If anything the difficulties, struggles and personal sacrifices that members often felt they had to make to sustain their commitment to the church appeared to reinforce the strength of their commitment. It was definitely the case that many members believed that the effort they made to commit themselves to the church was an example of how important that commitment was to them. When I asked members how important their commitment was to them, many replied simply by describing how much effort they had made, sometimes over decades, to attend and carry out their responsibilities in the church.

One of the salient features of their commitment was that they experienced it as a personal decision. Although they were committed to a group that was by its very definition collective they believed that their commitment was essentially personal and individual in nature. In the quality of their commitment to a specific church and in their belief that that commitment was personal and individual the nature of their commitment to the church was reminiscent of qualities associated to more contemporary forms of religiosity. This aspect of their commitment was evident in a variety of ways.

The first was that they were relatively unconcerned about the fate of the wider church. Their worries about the next generation of church members or the future of the church generally were really limited to *their* church. The particular nature of their concern was evident in the discussions on the decline in church membership and evangelism.

Although members recognised that a significant decline in church membership was problematic for the church many of them argued that decline was positive. Many of them interpreted 150 years of decline as a healthy development because they had weeded out all the people who only attended church because of tradition, or social or parental pressure. The few who were left were genuine Christians. Others were unclear about the exact nature of decline and some thought the media either exaggerated it or that the church was slowly beginning to grow again.

There were slightly different interpretations of decline among members but a common theme was their reluctance to evangelise. The bulk of the interviews took place in the second half of the Decade of Evangelism but most members were either unaware of its existence or believed that it was not relevant to their church. Essentially evangelism was something that happened in other people's churches. Members believed that evangelism was particularly difficult in today's conditions or that the church must find new ways to evangelise that didn't involve them in active proselytising.

Similarly many members redefined evangelism as spiritual renewal. They argued that before church members could attempt to win new people the existing church members must first renew their own spirituality. Some members also believed that renewal was not merely a precursor to evangelism, but that it was a form of evangelism and that therefore traditional evangelism was unnecessary.

Generally members did not believe that the task of evangelism was their responsibility. Many core members explained that they believed that their voluntary work in the community, their personal example of Christian behaviour and living, already constituted evangelism. Others argued that evangelism was only suited to certain types of churches or church members and that they did not fall into that category.

Most thought that there were other opportunities for evangelism that were not working as effectively as they could be. They believed that the Establishment of the Church of England provided opportunities for evangelism that the church could take greater advantage of. They also believed that education should take a more responsible role in educating children about Christianity.

This was in contrast to their attitudes to the nurturing of Christianity in the context of their own children. Members were uncomfortable with the idea of pressurising their children to come to church. They indicated that they thought that their children should learn more about Christianity in school but they were unwilling to persuade their children to attend church beyond a certain age. They wanted their children to know more about their faith but they saw running a Sunday school as a burden or as a form of 'baby sitting'.

This ambiguity was also reflected in their views on their children's adult relationship to the church. In interviews most members said that they were not concerned about their adult children's lack of involvement with a church. Many defended their children's absence by explaining that young people were very busy or that the pressures on young adults were greater today than in the past.

One explanation for their unwillingness to evangelise or to put pressure on their children to attend church was their belief that commitment to a church was a personal choice and that the decision to become a member of a church was the decision of an individual. Members believed that this was true of themselves. In the questionnaires I asked how they had been introduced to their current church. The majority replied that 'I introduced myself'. In the interviews it became clear that the majority of members were actually introduced to their church through friends, family or through participation in a rite of passage. They had ticked the option 'I introduced myself' because they believed that they had taken the final decision to join the church independent of the pressure or reason of others.

This interpretation of their commitment as the choice of an independent agent was reflected in their early childhood experiences of church and the experiences of their own children. Although only 20 per cent of adult members were lifetime attendees of church many more had attended church as children or teenagers. They interpreted this childhood experience as useful but one that had not played a significant role in their adult decision to join a church.

The children of church members shared many of their experiences of church and their attitudes towards the decline in church membership. The majority did not think that decline was a problem and only one of the 17 that I interviewed expected to be a lifetime member of a church.

It seemed that a common understanding of commitment across all generations within the church was that membership was the responsibility of the individual and that becoming a member of a church was a personal journey. The personal and individual nature of their commitment to the church was a theme that occurred in members' definition of community. They believed that their churches were communities but that they were communities not bound by shared values or beliefs but by their individual commitment, their belief in belonging.

It was in members' definition of community that the real sociological significance of their church membership was most apparent. As it was understood and defined in the classical sociological tradition, community referred to a particular stage in the development of society. Although communities were associated with positive values they could not be created through the personal will of individuals. In contrast to this understanding of community members believed that their communities were constructed and maintained by the will of individuals. The significance of the congregations I studied was that they appeared to be examples of individuals attempting to build communities within the framework of a preexisting structure, in this case the Church of England. Their communities and the relationships within them were a combination of traditional forms with new meanings.

In the questionnaires members indicated that the reason most of them attended their church was because it was a part of their community. Throughout the interviews it was clear that members not only considered their churches to be communities but that they valued community as a positive idea. They believed that communities were positive environments in which to live but they also associated certain values with the existence of community. The values of warmth and supportive relationships were continually referred to in when they described communities.

Despite the consensus between members of both churches that communities were highly valued, the personal experience of many seemed to contradict this belief. Relationships were sometimes strained, members often felt excluded or unwelcome, and some members described years of feeling unhappy or slighted by the vicar or other members in the same church. Despite the contradiction between members' descriptions of the values and relationships they associated

with community and the personal experience of many of them, individual church members did not experience it as a contradiction.

Members explained that the most important thing about their community was that it allowed them the opportunity to participate. There was a suggestion that their desire to participate, their belief in belonging, was formed before they actually became a part of the community. What was certain was that even where members expressed unhappiness with their relationships within the church their desire to belong to a community was stronger than any unhappiness associated with their membership of a community. Unlike the communities described in the classical sociological tradition in which people were born into, members decided to join their communities as a matter of personal choice.

Many members gave further examples of the strength of their belief in the importance of belonging. Members constantly associated certain values with the absence of community. They believed that lives lived outside of communities were less meaningful and that the relationships were more superficial. They thought that the pressures of normal life and especially personal tragedies would be intolerable outside of the boundaries of a community.

Not only did they associate the qualities of individualism, selfishness and materialism with the absence of community, but they believed that these qualities actually destroyed community. They were particularly antagonistic towards materialism and selfishness; they saw these as diminishing the quality of people's lives and as ultimately destructive. Their attitude towards individualism was ambiguous because they recognised that this was a quality some of them identified in their children or partners who did not attend church.

Their hostility towards these qualities was exacerbated by the fact that they associated their growth with the decline of the church and an erosion of a belief in belonging. They recognised that a desire to belong and the belief in belonging were unusual sentiments in society but this same recognition served to intensify their individual commitment to the belief in belonging. The fact that the existence of community within society was uncommon served to make the existence of their community more exceptional. This was accompanied by the belief that belonging to a community was a matter of personal choice. Just as they believed that their decision to join a community was a choice they had made independently so they thought that others could also make the same choice if they wanted to. In this way the belief in belonging, the desire and actual participation in a community was interpreted as a moral choice.

The belief that commitment to a church was a moral choice was an essential factor in defining the nature of the relationships and the community to which they belonged and indicates the contemporary significance of the two congregations. These communities were constructed and entered into by individuals who believed they were making a moral decision to participate and belong. Members identified the most important aspect of their membership of the church as their

commitment to the church itself. They defined that commitment in terms of behaviour rather than beliefs, similarly they defined the church they were committed to in terms of its practice rather than its beliefs. There membership of the church was not merely a continuation of the membership of past generations but the activity of individuals seeking something they desired and which they believed is lacking in world around them.

CHURCH and COMMUNITY QUESTIONNAIRE

The aim of this questionnaire is to provide information for a thesis on the Modern Church of England and more specifically on the people who attend Church. Many of the questions included in the questionnaire are not directly religious. This is because I am interested in the wider beliefs and activities of parishioners outside of their church and I hope that this kind of detailed information will provide a more accurate picture. The questionnaires are anonymous so that the information on any single questionnaire can not be traced to any individual. When I have written up my thesis I will provide the parish with a copy so that you can see the results of this questionnaire, I would also like to thank you for taking the time and effort to participate in this survey.

Lynn Revell

SECTION A

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Please circle your answer

1. Sex	Male	1
	Female	2
2. Age	18-22	1
	23-40	2
	41-65	3
	66 and over	4
3. Marital status	Married	1
	Living with partner	2
	Widowed	3
	Separated or divorced	4
	Single	5
4. Are you still receiving full-time education?	Yes	1
	No (please go to question 7)	2
5. Where are you receiving your education?	School	1
	FE College	2
	University/HE College	3
	Teacher training college	4
	Other	5
6. What do you anticipate doing when you complete your education?	Employment (please specify)	1
	.....	
	Travel	2
	Voluntary work	3
	Unemployed	4
	Other (please specify)	5
	.....	

IF YOU HAVE NOT COMPLETED YOUR EDUCATION PLEASE GO TO SECTION B

7. How would you describe your current situation?	Paid, full-time work	1
	Paid, part-time work	2
	Seeking work	3
	Retired	4
	Sick	5
	Looking after home and family	6
	Other (please specify)	7

8. At what age did you leave full-time education? .....

IF YOU ARE NOT WORKING PLEASE GO TO SECTION B

9. How would you describe your occupation?
(Please be as specific as possible) .....

.....

SECTION B

YOU and YOUR FAMILY

1. Do you have any children?	Yes	1
	(If no please go to question 14) No	2
2. Are your children still living with you?	Yes	1
	(If no go to question 14) No	2
3. How many children do you have?	One	1
	Two	2
	Three	3
	Four	4
	More than four	5

4. How old are your children?

.....

6. Would you prefer your child's school religious education to concentrate on Christianity?	I would like my child to be aware of other faiths but would prefer their education to be mostly Christian	1
	My child's RE should be wholly Christian	2
	RE should give the same amount of time to all religions	3
7. Do your children have contact with your church or any other church?	Yes	1
	(If no please go to question 14) No	2
8. How often do your children have contact with a church?	Very infrequently	1
	Once or twice a month	2
	Once a week	3
	More than once a week	4
9. Would you like your children to have more contact with a church either now or in the future?	No	1
	Yes, I would like them to participate fully in the life of the church	2
	I have no opinion on this question	3
	Other (please specify)	4
	.....	
	.....	
10. Do you anticipate that when your children leave home or come to school leave age that their contact with a church will decline or continue?	Decline	1
	Continue	2
	Not Sure	3

11. Do you encourage your children to have contact with a church?	No	1
	Only when they are younger	2
	Yes	3
12. What kind of contact do your children have with a church? (Please circle more than one answer if this is appropriate)	Attends church nursery	1
	Attends Sunday School	2
	Attends some other group or society held on church premises Eg. Youth club, Scouts, etc.	3
	Accompanies you to church services	4
	Helps with the running or organisation of the church in some way. Eg. Raising money etc.	5
	Other (please specify)	6
	.....	
13. Do your children's friends have contact with a church?	Most of them have contact with a church	1
	About half of them have contact with a church	2
	A minority of them have contact with a church	3
	None of my children's friends have contact with a church	4
14. Are you married or living with someone?	Yes	1
	(If no please go to section C) No	2
15. Does your partner have more or less contact with a church than you?	My partner has no contact with a church	1
	My partner has less contact with a church than me	2
	My partner has the same contact with a church as me	3
	My partner has far more contact with a church than me	4

16. Did your parents, grandparents or guardians encourage you or accompany you to church when you were younger?	No	1
	Only in a very casual way	2
	Yes, it was quite important for them	3

SECTION C

FRIENDS AND NEIGHBOURS

1. Do your friends have contact with a church?	None of them have contact with a church	1
	Some of them have contact with a church	2
	Most of them have contact with a church	3
2. How important is it to you that your close friends understand and share your religious beliefs?	Not at all important	1
	Fairly important	2
	Very important	3
3. Do you ever discuss your religious beliefs or activities with non-Christian friends?	No	1
	Sometimes	2
	Quite often	3
4. Do you ever attend social occasions organised by or on behalf of the church?	(If no please go to section D) No	1
	Very occasionally	2
	Sometimes	3
	Usually	4

5. How do you feel about these social events?	I usually look forward to them, I would miss them if I couldn't go	1
	I'm usually too busy to attend	2
	If I do attend it is through a sense of duty to my partner or other friends	3

SECTION D

YOU and YOUR CHURCH

1. How often you attend Sunday morning services?	Almost every Sunday	1
	About twice a month	2
	About once a month	3
	Very occasionally	4
2. Who else attends church from your household?	No one	1
	One person	2
	Two people	3
	Three or more people	4
3. How long have you attended this church?	Less than six months	1
	Six months to two years	2
	More than two but less than five years	3
	More than ten years	4
4. How were you first introduced to this church?	Through a friend or a member of a family	1
	Through the preparation or participation in a baptism confirmation, marriage or funeral	2
	I introduced myself	3

5. What is the most important reason you continue to attend this church?	Because it is the nearest to my house	1
	Because I want to worship with my friends or family	2
	I feel obliged to attend because of my friends or family	3
	This type of church suits me better than any other I've visited in the area	4
	Because this church is a part of the community in which I live and feel as though I belong	5
6. If for some reason your church was shut down would you join another church?	Yes, I would immediately find another church in my area	1
	It would depend on how far away the new church was	2
	No	3
7. Apart from the closure of your church could you think of any reason why you would stop attending your church?	Loss of faith	1
	Family or work commitments	2
	Other (Please specify)	3
	.....	
	.....	
	.....	

8. Are you involved in any other activities to do with the running or organisation of the life of the church?	Yes	21
	(If no please go to section E) No	22

9. In what way do you help with the work of the church? (Please circle more that one answer if this is appropriate)	I help to raise money for the upkeep of the church or for any other cause that the church needs money for	1
	I help to clean or maintain the fabric of the church, church buildings or church grounds in some way	2
	I help with the running or supervision of groups that are based or centred round the church	3
	I am a church warden	4
	I sit on the parochial council	5
	I am in the church choir	6
	Other (Please specify)	7
	.....	
	.....	

10. How many different activities around the church do you normally participate in a week (apart from Sunday Service)?	One	1
	Two	2
	Three	3
	Four	4
	Five or more	5

11. How did you become involved in helping with the running of the church?

Through a friend of my family	1
I was asked by the vicar or other church official	2
I decided to volunteer on my own	3
In response to a request for help in the parish magazine or from the pulpit	4

12. To what extent would you be prepared to reorganise your personal or working life Eg. spending less time with your family, sacrificing free time, leaving work early or missing social events outside of the parish.

Never	1
To a limited extent	2
I would always try to do the best I could	3
I would prioritise my commitment to the church over and above my free time or social life but not my family	4
Only in exceptional circumstances	5
Other (Please describe)	6

.....

.....

.....

13. What is the major reason you continue to involve yourself in the life of the church?	This type of activity allows me to show my commitment and love for God	1
	I feel responsible for helping my friends and family and that I have duty to help the church	2
	I enjoy the friendship of the people I do this work with	3
	Tradition or habit, I could not imagine not doing these things	4
	Other (Please describe)	5
	.....	
	.....	
14. If your contribution towards the running of the church was replaced by someone else, how would you feel?	Relieved that I have more free time	1
	If I thought this person could do the job better than me I would find some other way to contribute to the church	2
	No feelings either way	3
	I would feel unappreciated and upset	4
	Other (please describe)	5
	.....	
	.....	

SECTION E

POLITICS and the CHURCH

1. Did you vote in the last election?	Yes	1
	(If no please go to question 3) No	2

2. Who did you vote for in the last election?

Conservative	1
Labour	2
Liberal Democrats	3
Other (please describe)	4

.....

(PLEASE GO TO QUESTION 4)

3. Why didn't you vote in the last election?

I disagreed with the policies of every party	1
I believe that voting makes very little difference	2
I am not interested in politics	3
I couldn't be bothered	4
Other (please specify)	5

.....

.....

.....

4. Are you a member of any political party?

No	1
The Conservative party	2
The Labour Party	3
Liberal Democrats	4
Other (Please specify)	5

.....

.....

5. What do you think of the senior churchmen and women speaking out on the policies or behaviour of politicians?

Representatives of the church should NOT be seen to be taking sides in political disputes 1

Representatives of the church should comment on the behaviour or policies of politicians only where they touch on issues that relate to the running or integrity of the church 2

Representatives of the church have a responsibility to be seen to be taking sides on any political discussion that has a moral , social or more explicit religious dimension 3

Other (Please specify) 4

.....

.....

6. The Church of England is an established church. This means that it is not completely independent of the English state. The disestablishment of the Church of England has been discussed by the church itself in the past and at the moment there is a private member's bill going through Parliament that proposes the disestablishment of the Church of England.

Please circle the statement you most agree with

The relationship between the Church of England and the State is a part of the heritage and culture of this country and it should not be altered in any significant way 1

The relationship of the church to the state makes no real difference to the Church or to English culture or tradition 2

The Church of England would be in a far stronger position to preach the Gospel if its ties to the state were severed 3

7. Many members of the shadow cabinet are practising Christians. E.g. Tony Blair and Gorden Brown. What effect if any do you think this would have on the policies of any future Labour Government?

None. In political practical considerations, outside pressures and power rather than religious beliefs will always dominate the agenda 1

To a limited extent but religious beliefs would probably be tempered with other considerations 2

A great deal. The religious beliefs of so many senior politicians can not help but influence and direct government policy 3

None of the above. (Please state your view) 4

.....

.....

.....

8. There is an old saying that 'The Church of England is the Tory Party at Prayer'. What do you think of this saying?

True in the past but not true today 1

Still true today 2

It only applies to a minority in the church 3

It was never true 4

9. Do you read a paper?

No 1
The Times 2
The Independent 3
The Guardian 4
The Telegraph 5
The Mirror 6
The Sun 7
The Daily Mail 8
Other (Please specify) 9

10. Are you a member or involved any group that deals with the environment or animal welfare?

No 1

Yes (please specify) 2

.....

11. Do you help with any official charity?

No 1

Yes (please specify) 2

.....

SECTION F

BROADER QUESTIONS ON THE CHURCH AND BELIEF

1. Congregations of the Church of England tend to be older rather than younger, predominantly women and mostly middle class. Do you think the Church of England should be trying to change this situation?

No, it's a natural and expected phenomena 1

Yes, the Church should do a great deal more to encourage people from different age groups and communities to join the church 2

It is the responsibility of both laity and clergy to work together to rebuild the church 3

Other (Please Explain) 4

.....

.....

.....

2. Recently the Church of England allowed the ordination of women priests. What do you think of this move?

It is a change that has been long overdue 1

I am against the ordination of women 2

I don not really support this move but I tolerate it because I feel that the church should be unified 3

Other (Please explain) 4

.....

.....

.....

.....

3. Some senior churchmen have suggested that the church should take a firmer stand on certain issues eg. Divorce, homosexuality and unmarried mothers. What do you think?

I agree 1

The church must modernise its ideas so that it represents the views and feelings of wider sections in society 2

The Church of England is a broad church and there is room for many different views in the one church 3

Other (please explain your view) 4

.....

.....

.....

Church and Community Questionnaire

Section A
Background Information

		No.	%
1. Sex	Male	39	32.5
	Female	86	73.
2. Age	16 - 22	6	5.
	23 - 40	20	17.
	41 - 65	51	42.5
	66	43	36.
3. Marital Status	Married	78	66.5
	Living with partner	3	2.5
	Widowed	20	17.
	Separated or divorced	1	0.8
	Single	16	13.
4. Still in full time education	yes	7	5.
	no	118	94.
5. Where are you receiving eduation?		N/A	
6. What do you anticipate doing after?		N/A	
7. How would you describe your current situation ?			
	Paid, full time	47	39.
	Seeking Work	1	0.8
	Retired	54	45.
	Full time education	6	3.
	Looking after home and family	12	11.
Section B **You and Your Family**			
1. Do you have any children?	yes	33	26.
	no	92	74.
2. Are your children still living with you ?	yes	36	29.
	no	84	74.
3. How many children do you have ?	-	N/A	
4. How old are your children?	-	N/A	
6. Would you prefer your child's religious education to concentrate on Christianity?	I would like my child to be aware of other faiths but would prefer their education to be mostly Christian.	26	72.
	Wholly Christian	4	11.
	RE should give the same time to all religions	6	16.
7. Do your children have any contact with a church?	Yes	32	89.
	No	4	11.

8. How often do your children have contact with a church?	Very infrequently	9	25.
	Once or twice a month	4	11.
	Once a week	19	25.
	More than once a week	10	28.
9. Would you like your children to have more contact with a church either now or in the future?	Yes, I would like them to participate fully in the life of the church.	10	28.
	No opinion	24	70.
	Other	2	1.
10. Do you anticipate that when your children leave home or come to school leaving age that their contact with a church will decline or continue?	Decline	13	36.
	Continue	8	22.
	Not sure	15	42.
11. Do you encourage your children to have contact with a church?	Yes	29	80.
	Only when younger	3	8.
	No	4	11.
12 What kind of contact does your child have with a church ?	Attends a group other than Sunday School held on church premises	9	25.
	Sunday School	5	14.
	Accompanies you to church services	8	22.
	Server	1	3.
	Other	13	36.
13. Do your children's friends have contact with a church?	Most of them have contact with a church	5	14.
	Half of them	11	24.
	A minority of them	13	36.
	None of them	7	22.
15. Does your partner have more or less contact with a church than you?	My partner has no contact with a church	18	23.
	My partner has much less contact with a church than me	14	18.
	My partner has the same contact with a church as me	41	53.
	My partner has far more contact with a church than me	8	10.
16. Did your parents,grandparents or guardians encorage you or accompany you to church when you were younger?	Yes, it was quite important for them	39	31.
	Only in a very casual way	51	41.
	No	30	24.

Section C **Friends and Neighbours**			
1. Do your friends have contact with a church?	None of them	8	6
	Some of them	55	44
	Most of them	57	46
2. How important is it to you that your close friends understand and share your religious beliefs?	Not at all important	52	42
	Fairly important	46	37
	Very important	22	18
3. Do you ever discuss your religious beliefs or activities with non Christian friends?	No	17	14
	Sometimes	82	66
	Quite often	21	17
4. Do you ever attend social occasions organised by or on behalf of the church?	No	18	14
	Very occasionally	2	1.5
	Sometimes	42	34
	Usually	58	46
5. How do you feel about these social events ?	I usually look forward to them, I would miss them if I couldn't go	74	59
	I'm usually too busy to attend	15	12
	If I do attend it is usually through a sense of duty to my partner or other friends	19	15
Section D **You and Your Church**			
1.How often do you attend Sunday morning services?	Always/almost every Sunday	95	79
	About twice a month	8	7
	About once a month	8	7
2. Who else attends from your household?	No one	19	15
	One person	39	32.5
	Two people	33	26
	Three or more people	12	11
3. How long have you attended this church?	Less than six months	3	0.25
	Six months to two years	10	8
	Between two and five years	12	10
	Between five and ten years	24	20
	More than ten years	70	59

4. How were you first introduced to this church?	Through a friend or a member of my family	32	27
	Through the preparation or participation in a baptism, confirmation, marriage or funeral.	24	20
	I introduced myself	54	42
5. What is the most important reason you continue to attend this church?	This type of church suits me better than any other I've visited in this area	21	17.5
	It is the nearest to my house	6	5
	I want to worship with my friends and family	14	12
	I feel obliged to attend because of my friends and family	3	25
	This church is a part of the community in which I live and feel as though I belong to	76	63
6. If for some reason your church was shut down would you join another church?	Yes, I would immediately find another church in my area	97	81
	It would depend on how far away the new church was	21	17
	No	2	1.5
7. Apart from the closure of your church could you think of any reason why you would stop attending your church?	Family or work commitments	18	14
	Loss of Faith	3	2.5
	Illness	30	24
	Other	51	42.5
8. Are you involved in any other activities to do with the running or organisation of the life of the church?	Yes	71	57
	No	49	40
9. In what way do you help with the work of the church?			
10. How many different activities around the church do you normally participate in a week (apart from a Sunday service)	One	21	17
	Two	25	20
	Three	15	12
	Four	6	5
	Five	3	2
	Six	1	1.4

11. How did you become involved in helping with the running and organisation of the church?	In response to a request for help in the parish magazine or from the pulpit.	7	5.5
	I was asked by the vicar or other church official.	55	44
	I decided to volunteer on my own.	11	11.5
	Through a friend or member of my family.	13	10
12. To what extent would you be prepared to reorganise your personal life eg. spending less time with your family, sacrificing free time, leaving work early or missing social events outside of the parish?	I would prioritise my commitment to the church over and above my free time or social life but not my family	31	25
	To a limited extent	13	10
	I would always try to do the best I could	41	33
	Never	10	11
	Only in exceptional circumstances	2	1
13. What is the major reason you continue to involve yourself in the life of the church?	This type of activity enables me to show my commitment and love for God	54	43
	I enjoy the friendship of the people I do this work with	19	15
	Tradition or habit I could not imagine not doing these things	1	
	I feel responsible for helping my friends and family and that I have a duty to help the church	9	7
14. If your contribution towards the running of the church was replaced by someone else, how would you feel?	If I thought this person could do the job better than me I would find some other way to contribute to the church	55	57
	Relieved that I have more free time	5	5.5
	No feelings either way	20	21
	I would feel unappreciated and upset	4	4.5
Section E **Politics and the Church**			
1. Did you vote in the last national election?	Yes	106	88
	No	14	11.5
2. Who did you vote for in the last election?	Conservative	62	52
	Labour	15	12.5
	Liberal Democrats	26	22

3. Why didn't you vote in the last election?	Disagreed with the policies of every party	1	7
	Believe voting makes little difference	2	14.3
	Not interested in politics	3	21.4
	Couldn't be bothered	0	0
	Other	8	57
4. Are you a member of any political party?	Yes	22	24
	No	97	72
5. What do you think of senior churchmen and women speaking out on the policies or behaviour of politicians?	Representatives of the church should NOT be seen to be taking sides in political disputes	26	21
	Representatives of the church should comment on the behaviour or policies of politicians only where they touch on issues that relate to the running or integrity of the church	25	21
	Representatives of the church have a responsibility to be seen to be taking sides on any political discussion that has a moral, social or more explicit religious dimension	69	57.5
6. The Church of England is an established church. This means that it is not completely independent of the English state. The disestablishment of the Church of England has been discussed by the church itself in the past and at the moment there is a private members bill going through Parliament that proposes the disestablishment of the Church of England.	The relationship between the Church of England and the state is a part of the heritage and culture of this country and it should not be altered in any significant way	48	40
	The relationship of the church to the state makes no real difference to the Church or to English culture or tradition	38	30
	The Church of England would be in a far stronger position to preach the Gospel if its ties to the state were severed	34	31

7. Many members of the shadow cabinet are practising Christians. eg. Tony Blair and Goredan Brown. What effect if any do you think this would have on the policies of any future Labour Government?	None. In politics practical considerations ,outside pressures and power rather than religious beliefs will always dominate the agenda	27	22.5
	To a limited extent but religious beliefs would probably be tempered with other considerations	62	51.5
	A great deal. The religious beliefs of so many senior politicians can not help but influence and direct government policy	21	17.5
	Other	10	8
8. There is an old saying that " the Church of England is the Tory Party at prayer." What do you think of this saying?	It only applies to a minority in the church	46	36.8
	True in the past but not true today	48	38
	Still true today	8	6.4
	It was never true	22	17.6
9. Do you read a paper?	No	20	16.5
	Times	14	11.5
	Independent	5	4
	Guardian	7	6
	Telegraph	23	19
	Express	7	4
	Sunday Express	15	12.5
	Daily Mail	14	11.5
	Financial Times	5	4
10. Are you a member or involved in any group that deals with the envionment or animal welfare ?	No	87	72.5
	Animal welfare	10	8
	Envionment	20	16
11. Do you help with any official charity ?	No	60	48
	Yes	65	52

Section F **Broader questions on the church and belief**			
1. Congregations of the Church of England tend to be older rather than younger, predominantly women and mostly middle class. Do you think the Church of England should be trying to change this situation?	Yes, the Church should do a great deal more to encourage people from different age groups and communities to join the church.	41	34
	No, its a natural and expected phenomena.	9	7.5
	It is the responsibility of both laity and clergy to work together to rebuild the church.	62	52
	Other	8	7
2. Recently the Church of England allowed the ordination of women priests. What do you think of this move?	I do not really support this move but I tolerate it because I feel the Church should be unified	13	10.5
	It is a change that has been long over due	84	72
	I am against the ordination of women	14	11
	Other	8	7
3. Some senior churchmen have suggested that the church should take a firmer stand on certain issues Eg. divorce, homosexuality and unmarried mothers. What do you think?	The Church of England is a broad church and there is room for many different views in the one church.	50	42
	The Church must modernise its ideas so that it represents the views and feelings of wider sections in society.	26	22
	I agree	30	25
	Other	13	11

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