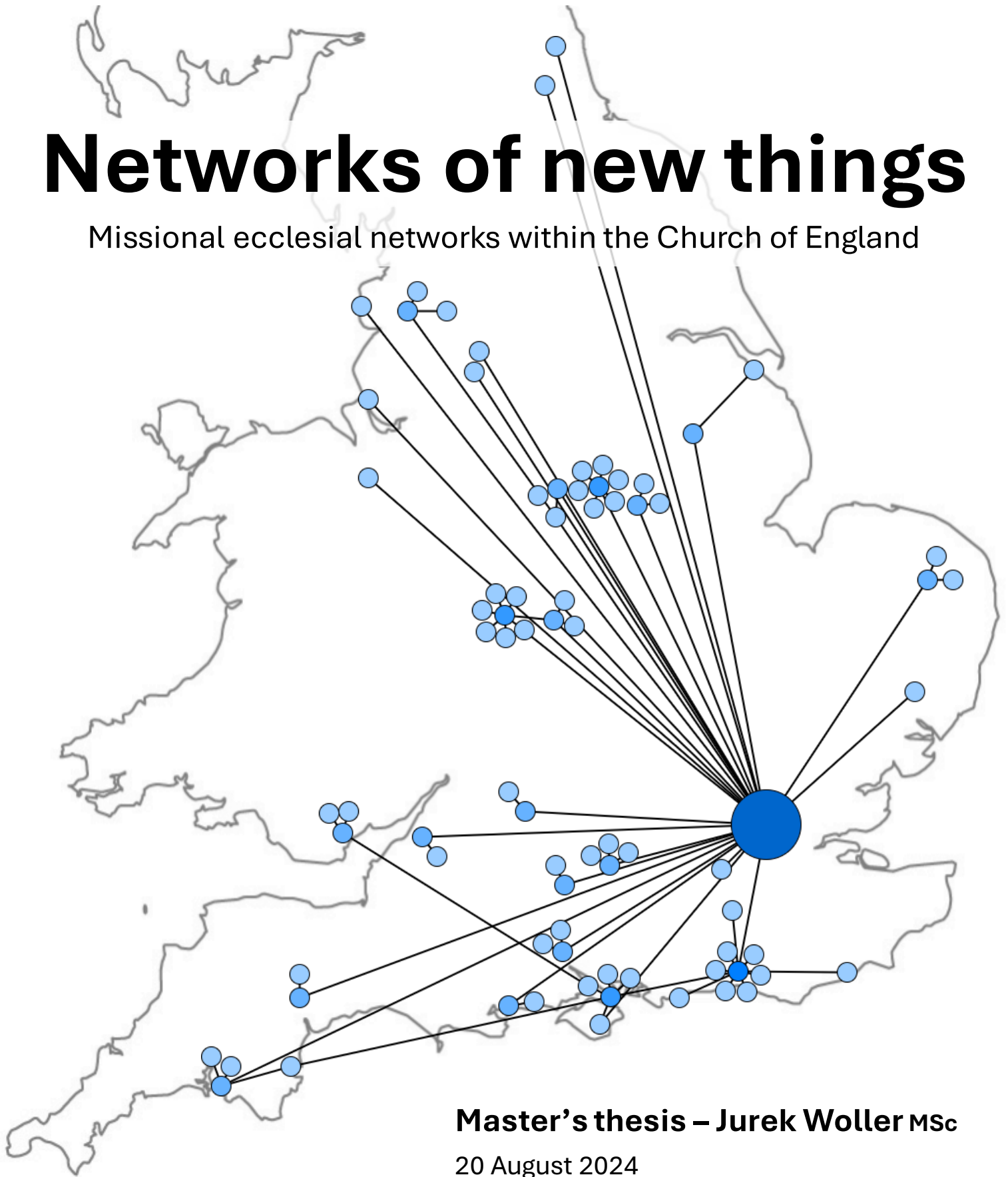


Networks of new things

Missional ecclesial networks within the Church of England



Master's thesis – Jurek Woller MSc

20 August 2024

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*See, I am doing a new thing!
Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?
I am making a way in the wilderness
and streams in the wasteland.*

Isaiah 43:19, NIV

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Preface

When, as a little boy, people asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up, I usually answered: *inventor*. That idea has stayed with me for the rest of my life, and brought me into many different innovative environments. But I would have never imagined that I would one day become involved in the *reinvention of the church!*

I feel very grateful to be part of the team leading such a vibrant network of churches like Noorderlicht Rotterdam. Simultaneously I am humbled by what is happening within the Church of England, with innovation of a scale, width, length *and* depth that is – by my understanding – unparalleled in the world! It is therefore a true privilege to have been able to research this fascinating church context.

I am indebted to many people, without whom this research could never have happened:

Niels de Jong, whom I first met as a fresh Christian and who several years later entrusted me to lead the first Noorderlicht church plant. His involvement at the start of this research was incredibly helpful.

Henk de Roest, who was not only one of the most inspiring teachers at the Protestant Theological University, but also provided me with the golden suggestion to ask Marten van der Meulen as my supervisor for this research. Marten's expertise – both as researcher and practitioner – and encouragement have been invaluable for me throughout the process.

This research would not have been possible without those who were so kind to offer their time, patience, insight and openness to me during the interviews that I have held: Andy Bond, Mark Elsdon-Dew, Toby Flint, Vicky Cox, Lydia Fuller, Linda Maslen, Tim Lea, Sam Wells, Nigel Wright, Andrew Yates and Sian Yates

Often there are 'unsung heroes' in a research like this, who provide a hint that turns out to be extremely valuable. I want to name those most significant for this research: Arnoud Drop, Mirthe Kuiper, Walter Reitsma, Gerben Roest, Ruth Six and Dennis Waakop-Reijers.

I would have not been able to carry out this research without the loving support of my family, friends, colleagues, and community members at Noorderlicht–Oranjekerk. I especially want to name my two boys Philip and Nathan, whom I adore, and my wife Aafke (not least for her patience and understanding in the last weeks of the research process!), whom I deeply love and truly admire.

But most of all I want thank the person who started it all. The single most important person I have stumbled upon in my life – or actually, who grabbed my hand while I was stumbling: Jesus Christ, my Lord and Saviour, Teacher and Friend.

Rotterdam, August 2024

1. Introduction

1.1. 'New things' within the Church of England

Significant changes have happened in the Church of England over the last decades. Confronted with dramatic decline – an attendance drop from roughly three million in 1960 to one million in 2010 – and widely perceived irrelevance¹, many initiatives were launched to change the tide. Although by far not all of them were fruitful, especially in the evangelical wing of the Church² there was a new energy that historian and priest Jeremy Morris describes as (potentially) a 'New Evangelical Revival'.³

The dominant image of a church in decline all over the board was challenged by David Goodhew in his book *Church Growth in Britain, 1980 to Present Day*, where he acknowledges the decline of some churches, but "substantial and sustained church growth has also taken place across Britain over the last 30 years. This growth is large-scale; it is occurring across a wide geographical range; it is highly multi-cultural in its social reach; and it shows no sign of slowing down."⁴ Although a large amount of this growth is outside the 'mainline' denominations, such as black and other ethnic minority churches, "even the contemporary Church of England is not immune from church growth. The membership of the Anglican diocese of London, the largest Anglican diocese in the country, has grown by over 70% since 1990."⁵ This growth has been driven by a wide variety of missional initiatives including a large number of new ecclesial communities in different shapes and sizes, which have been termed 'church plants', 'emerging church' and 'fresh expressions'.⁶

With the 2004 landmark report *Mission-shaped Church (MSC)*, this development was formally embraced within (at least part of) the Church of England. This report by the Archbishops Council not only endorsed the new missional initiatives, but challenged the whole conception of 'church'. In his foreword Archbishop Rowan Williams calls it "a real watershed" as "we have begun to recognize that there are many ways in which the reality of 'church' can exist."⁷ The years following MSC showed a further acceleration of new initiatives, in a combination of a grass-roots movement⁸ and more centrally led approaches.⁹

As a result of these developments, the ecclesiological vocabulary within the Church of England has been expanded greatly, with terms like 'church plant', 'fresh expression of church', 'resource church' and 'Messy Church', to name a few. In past years the explicit use of 'church' for such initiatives seems to have become less popular, with terms like 'new ecclesial community' or 'new worshipping community' being preferred by many.¹⁰

¹ Jeremy Morris, *A People's Church – A History of the Church of England* (London: Profile, 2022), p. 356.

² In the context of this Master's Thesis, 'Church' and 'C of E' refer to the Church of England.

³ Morris, *A People's Church*, pp. 372-375.

⁴ David Goodhew, 'Church Growth in Britain, 1980 to the Present Day' in David Goodhew (ed.), *Church Growth in Britain – 1980 to the Present* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), p.3.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Goodhew, *Church Growth in Britain*, pp. 3-7.

⁷ The Archbishops' Council, *Mission-shaped Church: Church Planting and Fresh Expressions of Church in a Changing Context* (London: Church House, 2004), p. vii.

⁸ Michael Moynagh, *Church in Life – Innovation, Mission and Ecclesiology* (London: SCM, 2017), p. 103.

⁹ Ric Thorpe, *Resource Churches – A story of church planting and revitalisation across the nation* (London: The Gregory Centre for Church Multiplication, 2021).

¹⁰ See Moynagh, *Church in Life*, p. 4; Will Foulger, *New Things – A theological investigation into the work of starting new churches across 11 dioceses in the Church of England* (Durham: The Centre for Church Planting Theology and Research, 2024), p. 7.

This trend was recently highlighted in Will Foulger’s *New Things* report about starting new churches in 11 dioceses across the Church of England. He notes that the – previously popular – terms ‘church plant’ and ‘fresh expression’ are hardly used anymore, perhaps because the meanings of these terms have become too narrow over the years. Therefore “the dioceses had chosen their favoured descriptor with the purpose of allowing for variety and range of ecclesial expression”.¹¹ To do justice to this wide variety of ecclesial initiatives, Foulger arrives at the term ‘new things’.¹²



Figure 1.1: Messy Church at Christ Church Bexleyheath¹³

1.2. ‘Networks of new things’

Despite the wide variety of these ‘new things’, a common feature is that they are at the level of an individual ecclesial community. Such a unit at a local level seems to be the focal point both within academia (as main topic of books and articles) and the wider church. There is perhaps one exception: the term ‘mixed ecology’ (or ‘mixed economy’), which points towards the complementarity of ‘new things’ and ‘inherited church’, has become hugely popular within the Church of England and related (academic) literature.¹⁴ The exact application of this term in concrete church settings is not always clear, however. How do these quite different types of church go together? Do they connect at a local level? Or are ‘inter-local’ connections between relatively similar churches more meaningful? For many of the new ecclesial communities this may actually be the case, through networks that share a common identity. In the past three decades or so, various ‘networks of new things’ have emerged and become increasingly influential. Despite this, not a lot of attention has been given to these networks as such; the focus remains primarily on being church at a local level.

¹¹ Foulger, *New Things*, p. 13.

¹² Foulger is not the only one using this term; The Creative Growth team for the Diocese of London uses it, when stating its objectives: “The Creative Growth team aims to help the Church: *Grow* in health, depth and impact. Reach new people by *starting a new thing*” ‘Creative growth London’ <https://ccx.org.uk/creative-growth-london/> (d.d. 22 July 2024)

¹³ All pictures in this thesis were taken by me, during a visit to London as part of this research (25-28 May 2024).

¹⁴ See for example: *Mission-shaped Church*, pp. xi and 26; Robin Gamble, ‘Mixed Economy: Nice Slogan or Working Reality?’, Michael Moynagh, ‘Do We Need a Mixed Economy?’ and Louise Nelstrop, ‘Mixed Economy or Ecclesial Reciprocity: Which Does the Church of England Really Want to Promote?’ in Louise Nelstrop (ed.) and Martin Percy (ed.), *Evaluating Fresh Expressions: Explorations in Emerging Church* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2008), pp. 15-23, 177-203; Foulger, *New Things*, pp. 13, 71 and 74.

The aim for this master's thesis is to add a contribution to academic literature where these 'networks of new things' do get the full attention. Given the limitations of this research, I am not able to cover all 'networks of new things' that are somehow connected to the Church of England. Three of the most prominent have been selected, that are very different and – each in its own right – impactful within the Church of England:

1. The **HTB network**: a large network of charismatic-evangelical churches originally planted from Holy Trinity Brompton, London. HTB is well known for the Alpha-course, and is said to have "extraordinary influence"¹⁵ on the Church of England.
2. The **Fresh Expressions network**: an ecumenical movement that aims to be a 'network of networks' that covers a wide range of different missionary initiatives which are highly contextualized (such as Messy Church). It started with initiatives in the Church of England and Methodist church, and received an enormous stimulus by the *Mission-shaped Church* report and its aftermath.¹⁶
3. The **HeartEdge network**: an ecumenical movement inspired by the practices of St Martin-in-the-Fields (London) and the writings of Sam Wells, organized around the 4C model of Compassion, Commerce, Culture and Congregation.¹⁷

Other networks have come across during this research as well, most notably New Wine: a charismatic evangelical network that is centred around an annual summer festival. The networks covered in this thesis are arguably the key players within the Church of England at this moment. Although very different in theological foundations, organizational principles and culture, these networks have some things in common: they are missional, they are church (ecclesial) and they have a wide ranging impact both within the UK and abroad.¹⁸

Such missional ecclesial networks are not new. In a multitude of church contexts – from the early church, to Pentecostal churches and the underground church in China – a network has been the most appropriate organizing principle for the church.¹⁹ Also in the history of the Church of England networks have played a prominent role, with as most salient example the rise of the Methodist movement in the 18th century. It started as "a renewal movement *within* the Church of England", but eventually this Methodist 'network of new things' separated due to deep tensions with the Church it was officially part of.²⁰

This historical case invokes questions for our current situation: could something similar happen again? Are such tensions building up? Or are interaction within these networks and with the wider Church of England actually healthy and energizing? Is a 'Mission-shaped Church of England' perhaps finally truly coming to life *thanks* to these networks? These – and many other – questions give sufficient ground for a thorough research into this subject.

¹⁵ Stephen Parsons, 'HTB: Extraordinary Influence', <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2022/11march/news/uk/strategic-development-fund-opens-a-route-to-faith-says-study> (d.d. 21 June 2024).

¹⁶ Moynagh, *Church in Life*, pp. 99-120.

¹⁷ See: Samuel Wells, *A Future that's Bigger than the Past – Catalysing Kingdom Communities* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2019).

¹⁸ The impact to the wider church is at least as such, that all these networks have impacted the Protestant Church in the Netherlands in one way or another.

¹⁹ Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating Apostolic Movements* (Ada, MI: Brazos, 2016), pp. 4-8, 13; Andrew Lord, *Network church: a Pentecostal ecclesiology shaped by mission* (Leiden, NL: Brill, 2012).

²⁰ Morris, *A People's Church*, p. 180; Stefan Paas, *Church Planting in the Secular West – Learning from the European Experience* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), pp. 77-78.

1.3. Research question and outline

Although such a relevant and complex theme might warrant a much more extensive research (including a historical, systematic theological and missiological perspective), hopefully this master's thesis will provide some useful insights. The aim is to do this from a perspective of *practical theology*, which means, amongst others, that the current praxis is an invaluable source of theological insight. As the church itself – deeply shaped by mission – is the main focus, the specific field of research is *missional ecclesiology*.²¹ Practical theological work is often interdisciplinary, this research is no exception: to properly understand missional ecclesial networks, literature from disciplines like network sciences and social sciences is combined with missional ecclesial literature and empirical research. The research question is as follows:

How can the structure and dynamics of 'networks of new things' within the Church of England be evaluated from a missional ecclesiological perspective?

To answer this question, I am using the following sub-questions:

- 1. What properties of networks are relevant for an ecclesial context?**
- 2. What insights from missional ecclesiological literature can be used for evaluating 'networks of new things'?**
- 3. How are the different 'networks of new things' within the Church of England structured, and what dynamics take place *within* these networks?**
- 4. What kind of dynamics take place *between* these networks and other parts of the Church of England, and what does that mean for the C of E as a whole?**

To properly value these questions, it is helpful to elaborate on a few key terms that may not speak for themselves. A brief discussion will (hopefully) help to understand how these terms are to be understood in the context of this research.

'Networks of new things' are networks that consist of ecclesial communities with a clear missional focus. The name and shape of such ecclesial communities can vary widely, from 'traditional church plants' and their 'sending churches', to 'fresh expressions', 'new worshiping communities' or 'inherited church' congregations that have engaged in missional initiatives.

The terms **structure** and **dynamics** are commonly used in network sciences, as the book title *The structure and dynamics of networks* by three prominent network scientists highlights²², but also in missional ecclesiology these terms can be found.²³ The structure of a network relates to the stuff it is made of and the shape of it. In other words, these are the (relatively) more recognizable properties of a network. Dynamics relate to what happens in and around the network: behaviours, interactions, change over time, and the like. Some of these dynamics may be clearly visible, others may be more subtle. There is not a clear boundary between structures and dynamics, as they are closely connected. For example, the structure of a network is often not static, but changes over time, under influence of the dynamics around it.²⁴

²¹ For more on the this term, and the connection between missiology and ecclesiology, see: Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, pp. 3-4, 321; Paas, *Church Planting in the Secular West*, pp. 264-265; Moynagh, *Church in Life*, p. 139.

²² Mark Newman, Albert-László Barabási, and Duncan J. Watts, *The Structure and Dynamics of Networks* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

²³ E.g. Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*; Moynagh, *Church in Life*.

²⁴ Newman, Barabási and Watts, *The Structure and Dynamics of Networks*, pp. 7-8.

To be able to uncover these structures and dynamics, I have first developed a specific way of looking at the ‘networks of new things’ within the Church of England. This *theoretical framework* is the outcome of the next two chapters of this thesis.

Chapter 2 is connected to the first-sub question and covers generic insights about networks and related concepts that are relevant for an ecclesial setting. It provides the basic material that can be used throughout this thesis to look at ecclesial networks in an informed manner.

Chapter 3 brings a clearly theological angle to the theoretical framework, by joining some of the most relevant insights from missional ecclesiological literature together with the network-concepts from the previous chapter. Together with chapter 2 it is used as a ‘lens’ to look at the ecclesial networks within the Church of England.

The focus of chapter 4 is on the structures and dynamics of the three ‘networks of new things’ that are the main subject of this thesis, in a ‘conversation’ between the theoretical framework, publicly available information, and qualitative research – most prominently through interviews with participants of these networks.

In chapter 5 the focus shifts to the interaction between these networks and other ecclesial networks in and around the Church of England, building on the previous chapter. This thesis ends with a conclusion and suggestions for next steps.

1.4. Research framework and methodology

As typical for practical theological research, both a theological and empirical dimension are taken into account in this research, supported by theoretical contributions from other disciplines like network sciences and social sciences. Often in practical theological research each component is put into a separate ‘bucket’ with its own specific role and phase in the research project.²⁵ In such a case, the theological perspective could be brought in relatively late to share a normative light on – already interpreted – empirical results.²⁶

Framework of innovation

This research follows a different approach, using the *emergent framework of innovation* – a framework rooted in complexity theory, presented and interpreted theologically by Michael Moynagh in *Church in Life* – which consists of six interwoven processes: *dissatisfaction, exploration, sense making, amplification, edge of chaos, and transformation*.²⁷ Moynagh considers these processes to be primarily conversational: “These interweaving processes, these boulevards for God’s future, revolve round conversations within people’s heads or between people.”²⁸

Although there is no consistent referencing to this process throughout this thesis, it has been the overarching framework from inception to completion of this thesis, and is envisioned to be used as

²⁵ Most well-known is Richard Osmer’s highly influential fourfold model, with an empirical, analytical, normative and pragmatic phase neatly separated. Although Osmer presents the *four tasks* as cyclical, in practice it is often used in a linearly. Richard Osmer, *Practical Theology – An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), p. 11; Henk de Roest, *Collaborative Practical Theology – Engaging Practitioners in Research on Christian Practices* (Leiden, NL: Brill, 2020), p. 32.

²⁶ Osmer, *Practical Theology*, p. 161.

²⁷ Moynagh, *Church in Life*, pp. 28-37.

²⁸ Moynagh, *Church in Life*, p. 36.

well for the valorisation phase.²⁹ To be more concrete: this research started with *dissatisfaction*³⁰ about the frequent use of network-language (and related terms like movement and ecology) within the Church of England, with relatively limited reflection on the actual meaning of such terms. These terms seem to be meaningful for many, referring to a 'thing' that matters to them, yet simultaneously there seems to be limited understanding. This led to *exploring* different directions, engaging in conversations through engaging with literature from a wide field of research and multifaceted qualitative research, with every conversation contributing to a level of *sense making* and/or *(dis)amplification* of a particular direction within the research. Such an approach often resulted in a creative tension, at the *edge of chaos*, in the hope that ultimately it will lead to *transformation* of knowledge regarding 'networks of new things' within the Church of England and the Church as a whole.

Normativity

This process can also be used to shed a light on *normativity*, one of the 'conundrums in practical theology'³¹. I would argue that normativity is actually *emerging* from the research, most eminently at the *edge of chaos* – the place where insights from human experience and theological tradition are kept in a creative tension.³² I take a similar view regarding the interaction between theological literature (chapter 3) and insight from other disciplines (chapter 2), hoping that it will result in mutual *transformation* in a theologically fruitful way.³³ Although the language of a 'theoretical framework that acts as a lens' suggests that chapter 2 and 3 together will act as normative for the empirical research, this is not the case. Much of the literature in chapter 3 contains valuable information regarding the practice within the Church of England, but more importantly: the lens was actually sharpened while (and by) looking, first only 'seeing people like trees, walking'.³⁴

²⁹ Multiple stakeholders have expressed interest in valorisation, including the *National Pioneering Team* ('Landelijk Team Pionieren') of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands, the IZB Impact-team from the Society for Mission in The Netherlands (IZB), and the Noorderlicht-network (see next paragraph). For a discussion on the importance and dynamics of valorization, see: De Roest, *Collaborative Practical Theology*, pp. 15-49.

³⁰ Here I mention my *dissatisfaction* at the start of this research. In reality, this was already a 'new' type of dissatisfaction, after an earlier dissatisfaction for me as practitioner, that I more fully describe in the next paragraph.

³¹ Tone Stangeland Kaufman, 'From the Outside, Within, or In Between? Normativity at Work in Empirical Practical Theological Research.' in Joyce Ann Mercer (ed.) and Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore (ed.) *Conundrums in Practical Theology* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), pp. 134-162.

³² Tone Stangeland Kaufman proposes a framework that maps different practical theological positions according to two axes: "The vertical axis runs from a position that explicitly privileges the theological tradition and divine revelation, whereas the position at the bottom end of the continuum gives more weight to human experience or practice in terms of revising or reshaping the received ecclesial tradition" (Kaufman, *From the Outside, Within, or In Between?*, p. 139). Regarding my positioning on this axis I would suggest this research to be exactly in the middle, allowing for a creative tension between 'inherited' theological insights and those emerging from practice – on the edge of chaos – without the risk of theological tradition 'lording over' any insights that spring up from lived experience, but also not at the other side the risk of the whole 'theological body of knowledge' being deconstructed into pieces on a trajectory that may lead to total fragmentation.

³³ Like Michael Moynagh has demonstrated by his theological reinterpretation of complexity theory through his *innovation framework*. See Moynagh, *Church in Life*, pp. 28-37.

³⁴ Mark 8:24.

Qualitative research methodology

For the qualitative research-part of this thesis *Facet Methodology* is used: a qualitatively-driven research orientation proposed by Jennifer Mason that fits well with “a multi-dimensional, entangled and connective ontology”.³⁵ To illustrate how the ontology of ‘networks of new things’ may be exactly as such, I propose the following conceptual model for the research topic.

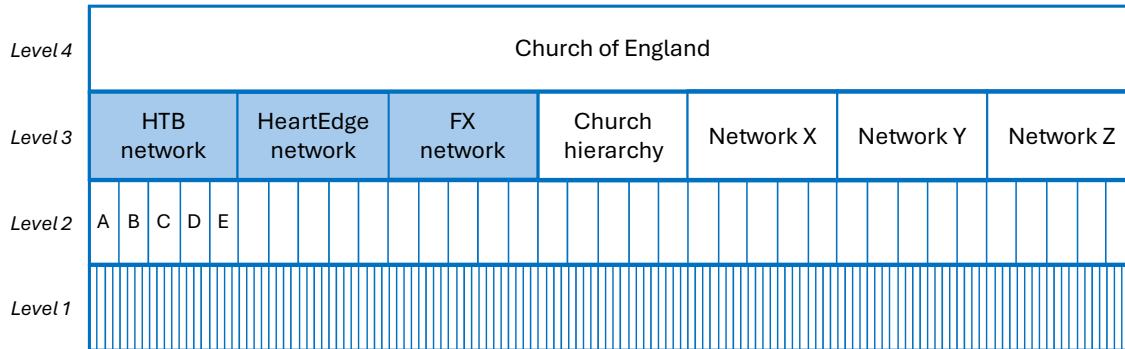


Figure 1.2: Conceptual model of the research topic, with the main focus coloured blue

This model does not depict a certain hierarchy, but shows four interrelated levels of organization, all consisting of interconnected ‘things’, that are together part of one or more ‘things’ at a higher level.

- 1 **A person**
- 2 **Community or team that acts as a separate unit**, such as an ecclesial community, separate organisation supporting a network (e.g. Revitalize Trust) or diocese leadership.
- 3 **Network formed by multiple ‘ecclesial units’**, such as the three ‘networks of new things’ that are the focus of this thesis, and similar networks like New Wine. The church hierarchy (incl. all dioceses, deanery, etc) can also be regarded as one network.
- 4 **All networks integrated into a whole: the Church of England**

Given their complex level of organization, it is impossible to directly engage with these networks. The closest one can get to obtaining knowledge of the network as a whole, is by drawing a map or obtaining some key numbers about it. Gaining knowledge about level 2 is easier – which may explain the vast amount of research at this level – but in most cases knowledge is still mediated through level 1, human beings. To make matters even more complex: if we follow through on the systems thinking (see §2.6) that so far has informed this discussion on ontology and epistemology, we have to take the context of the research topic into account – which are the other networks surrounding it, and even the higher level of organization that we call Church of England.

Given this complexity a multi-faceted approach is best suited to obtain insights, using “strategically and artfully designed *investigations* into particular aspects of the intellectual puzzle” that can be conceived of as a gemstone. Each of these investigations is ‘casting and refracting light’ on a particular facet of the research topic, resulting in ‘flashes of insight’. Compared to other methodologies, that seek more comprehensive knowledge of a research topic, Facet Methodology provides the freedom to use different epistemological approaches (‘playing with epistemologies’) that may engage in dialogue with each other, yielding surprising insights, with a relatively small facet potentially giving the brightest spark of insight.³⁶

³⁵ Jennifer Mason, *Qualitative Researching (Third Edition)* (London: Sage, 2018), pp. 42-47.

³⁶ Ibid.

Methods

Network structure visualization – Using publicly available information (websites) and information obtained by interviews (see below), I have made visualizations of the network structures.

Key figures – The same methods were used to obtain key numbers for each network.

Reading official communication from networks – I have read e-mail newsletters, magazines and annual reports from the different networks and related organisations: HTB, Revitalise Trust, HeartEdge, Fresh Expressions and CCX.

Reading practitioner stories and network history – Every network has its own ‘house theologian’, that uses stories from practitioners of the networks to support or illustrate their missional ecclesial works.³⁷ They also give their account of the historical developments of the network. For HTB there is a separate history book available as well.³⁸

Immersion in the local context – I have visited London 25-28 May 2024, immersing into the local context of all three networks:

Sunday

- Two services of HTB (9:30 Brompton Road, 18:30 Onslow Square)
- Messy Church at Christ Church Bexleyheath

Monday

- Prayer Room, HTB Brompton Road
- Café at the Crypt, shop and surrounding areas, St Martin-in-the-Fields
- Concert by Candlelight – Moonlight Sonata, St Martin-in-the-Fields

Tuesday

- Café at the Crypt, shop and surrounding areas, St Martin-in-the-Fields
- Eucharist service, St Martin-in-the-Fields

For every activity a participatory observation report was made, coded and analysed together with the interviews.

Interviews with network participants – For every network I have interviewed three participants (primarily)³⁹ online via Zoom. This was done for pragmatic reasons, but it also provided the benefit of making the coding process easier and enabling me to observe non-verbal communication during the coding and analysis process. The interviews were semi-structured and can be divided into four parts (see appendix for the interview format):

- 1 Personal experience in primary ecclesial environment
- 2 Personal experience being part of the network
- 3 Personal experience interacting with other networks
- 4 View on the network as a whole, and its interaction with other networks

The first three interview parts can be considered a qualitative investigation into *ego-centred networks* (the network around one specific person)⁴⁰ of the participants. The results have been coded thematically using ATLAS.ti.

³⁷ Michael Moynagh for Fresh Expressions, Ric Thorpe for HTB and Sam Wells for HeartEdge.

³⁸ Andrew Atherstone, *Repackaging Christianity – Alpha and the Building of a Global Brand* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2022).

³⁹ The one exception is nr. 9, that was conducted during and after the Messy Church gathering that I visited.

⁴⁰ Mark Newman, *Networks (Second Edition)*, (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 55.

Participants have been primarily selected based on location in the network: one person absolutely central in the network (1, 4 and 7), one relatively central (2, 5 and 8), and one at the edge (3, 6, and 9); secondarily the physical location was taken into account to obtain a geographical spread; tertiarily I have tried to obtain diversity in terms of gender and cultural background, with mixed results.⁴¹ Although by no means representative for the networks, this research design allows for maximum variety and depth for the interviews. All participants have consented to share their name and function details in this research.

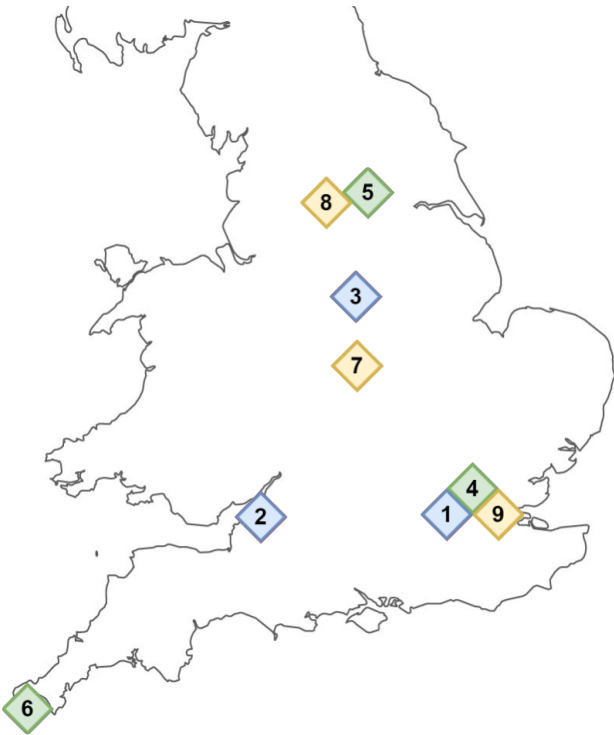


Figure 1.3: Location of interviewees

HTB network:

- 1. Mark Elsdon-Dew, Director of Planting, Revitalise Trust
- 2. Toby Flint, Senior Leader, St Nicholas Bristol
- 3. Andy Bond, Church Leader, St Francis Mackworth

HeartEdge network:

- 4. Sam Wells, Vicar St Martin-in-the-Fields London
- 5. Nigel Wright, Vicar St Edmund’s Church Leeds (until December 2023)
- 6. Andrew and Sian Yates, Priests Penlee Cluster (until April 2024)

Fresh Expressions network:

- 7. Tim Lea, Networking, FX Operations Team
- 8. Linda Maslen, Church Leader, Fountains Church Bradford
- 9. Vicky Cox and Lydia Fuller, Messy Church team, Christ Church Bexleyheath

⁴¹ For the HTB network I have approached 3 female participants that did not respond or were not available for an interview. During my research trip to London I have been able to informally speak to several people involved in HTB with a non-European ethnic background, part of them female.

1.5. The researcher

As a researcher I am not neutral, on the contrary: I am highly engaged in the subject matter as I am employed as leader of a new worshipping community within the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (PKN) that is part of an emerging network (the Noorderlicht-network⁴²). The community I am involved in is one of the *pioniersplekken* ('pioneer locations') within the PKN, which are heavily influenced by Fresh Expressions.⁴³ Just after becoming a Christian as a 27-year old (in 2012) I have followed an Alpha-course, and in the years following have been extensively involved in leading Alpha at Noorderlicht. As one of the strategic partner churches of the national Alpha team in the Netherlands we have visited the *Alpha Collective* conference in February 2020, which was hosted at Holy Trinity Brompton. There I first learnt about the HTB network⁴⁴ and experienced HTB culture vividly. During my theological training I have encountered the writings of Sam Wells, which I find highly inspiring.⁴⁵

In a 'previous life' I have been trained as an engineer with a specific focus on industrial innovation processes,⁴⁶ and worked as technical project leader at Unilever Research & Development. The knowledge and experience I have gained there still informs my thinking.

My drive for conducting this research is a twofold 'positive discontent':

- Being part of a growing 'network of new things' without fully understanding what it is, and not having the idea that anybody else grasps it.
- Being intrigued by the sheer scale, breadth and depth of things happening within the Church of England.

By researching such a different context, I hope to grow in understanding of my own context as well. During this research on the Church of England I act as an outsider; to be more precise, an *engaged* and *sympathetic outsider*. I am confident this research contributes to my own understanding of 'networks of new things'. I hope and pray others will benefit as well.

⁴² Currently a network of 5 worshipping communities under the name Noorderlicht in the Rotterdam metropolitan region, and Lux in the Hague. See <https://noorderlichtrotterdam.nl/> and <https://luxdenhaag.nl/> (d.d. 29 July 2024).

⁴³ This was mentioned in the FX annual report: "Collaborations extended globally, including resource translation into Dutch with the Protestant Church of the Netherlands", *FX Annual Report 2022-2023*, <https://freshexpressions.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/FX-Annual-Report-2023E.pdf>, p. 15.

⁴⁴ A presentation by Sarah Jackson, CEO of the Revitalise Trust.

⁴⁵ Most notably the concept of *being with*, which encouraged me to have lunch with a man experiencing homelessness during my research trip to London. Cf. Samuel Wells, *A Nazareth Manifesto: Being With God* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2015).

⁴⁶ My master's thesis for Industrial Engineering & Management (2009) is titled *An Ionic Liquids' based product – from potential applications to product design*.

Chapter 2: Understanding networks

2.1. Networks and the church

An important element of the new vocabulary introduced in the Church of England around the turn of the century (see §1.1 and 1.2) is ‘network-language’.

Network society

The 1994 report *Breaking new ground* mentioned “non-geographic networks as an increasing mission responsibility”,⁴⁷ its follow-up *Mission-shaped Church* (MSC) went further by grounding its advocacy for a wide variety of shapes and sizes of church in a societal analysis strongly revolving around networks: “The Western world, at the start of the third millennium, is best described as a ‘network society’. This is a fundamental change: ‘the emergence of a new social structure’” both on a global scale as locally. Not only can places such as London act as “physical hubs for the global network” networks, at a more local level neighbourhoods are changed, with a typical town having “an array of networks” centred around schools, workplaces and so on. It leads to the conclusion that: “human life is lived in a complex array of networks and that the neighbourhoods where people reside may hold only a very minor loyalty.”⁴⁸

Network churches

The argument of MSC is that to be able to connect to the people in this network society, a different type of church is required. These ‘network churches’ are not to be merely a supplement to the existing parish churches; both types of church are to be seen as equal partners that together form the “mixed economy of parish churches and network churches”, to enable the fulfilment of the Anglican calling “to be a Church for all”.⁴⁹ Such network churches can take very different forms, from ‘traditional church plants’ to many of the ‘fresh expressions of church’ identified in MSC. An important finding of the report is “that many of the fresh expressions of church [...] are connecting with people through the networks in which they live, rather than through the place where they live”, which implies that churches are in this way responding to the dynamics of a network society.⁵⁰

These network churches are not an Anglican invention. Although the Church of England reports may have been the first place where such forms of church are called ‘network church’, these forms of church have been prevalent in the wider church for a long time, particularly outside larger denominations. Often external circumstances, such as persecution, force the church to tap into the networks of its members. A well-known example is the underground church in China, that since the cultural revolution in the 1960s was forced to operate within the networks of congregation members.⁵¹ On the other end of the spectrum, ‘megachurches’ in the United States often attract people from a wide geographical area and can therefore also be considered network churches.⁵²

⁴⁷ Bob Hopkins, ‘Network church – Planting into social networks’, <https://acpi.org.uk/2017/01/02/network-church-planting-into-social-networks/> (d.d. 4 July 2024).

⁴⁸ *Mission-shaped Church*, pp. 4-5, 7. Cf. Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society (Second Edition)*, (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), p. xvii.

⁴⁹ *Mission-shaped Church*, pp. xi, 7, 12 and 35.

⁵⁰ *Mission-shaped Church*, pp. 7-8.

⁵¹ Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, pp. 5-6, 233-234.

⁵² Such churches are in terms of MSC ‘non-boundary’. *Mission-shaped Church*, pp. 63-65. For a ‘Megachurch definition’ <http://hrr.hartsem.edu/megachurch/definition.html> (d.d. 5 July 2024).

Church networks

Although networks on a societal and local church level receive most attention in MSC, there is a brief comment on an intermediate level of networks, using the term ‘resourcing networks’:

Within the Church of England there are a number of large churches or networks that actively church plant, or serve as a resource for planting, or that provide a model or template for church planting within particular Anglican traditions. These include New Wine, Holy Trinity Brompton, St Thomas Crookes (Sheffield) and Soul Survivor (for youth congregations).⁵³

Quite notably, all these ‘resourcing networks’ are in the charismatic evangelical part of the church, and active in church planting.⁵⁴ In the two decades following the report, such networks at ‘inter-church-level’ have gained more prominence. Some of them have clearly grown – most notably the HTB network from around 10 churches in 2004 to 173 in 2024⁵⁵ – and the breadth of theological underpinnings has been expanded significantly, thanks to the emergence of networks such as HeartEdge and the Fresh Expressions network. While many of these networks are clearly connected to the Church of England, most of them present themselves as ecumenical.⁵⁶ Outside the large denominations such ‘inter-church-networks’ play an even more important role, often as the main organizing principle. Again, the Chinese underground church is a good example, but also many Pentecostal and (other) evangelical churches operate like this.⁵⁷

In the current ecclesial vocabulary, this third meaning of ‘network’ is markedly the most prevalent use of the term. Implicitly, when talking about ‘networks’ in a church context, people mean ‘inter-church-networks’ such as those discussed above. Although the use of this term is a relatively new,⁵⁸ the actual ‘inter-church-networks’ themselves are not: a good case can be made that the early church was organized in such a way, and throughout history many more examples have emerged in very different church contexts.⁵⁹ As this type of network is the main subject of this thesis, it is worth to briefly discuss terms that are often used in connection with it: ‘movements’ and ‘ecology’.

Movements

Many of the ‘networks of new things’ are using the term ‘movement’ as well, sometimes almost used as a synonym, or at least closely related to ‘network’. To give an example: “Fresh Expressions is a movement that works on connections. We aim to be a network of networks.”⁶⁰ In other cases, ‘network’ and ‘movement’ are related to each other, but each clearly refer to something different. For example, in their book *Together For the City* Neil Powel and John James distinguish between city movements and networks; a movement is more localized, open and collaborative (cross-network,

⁵³ *Mission-shaped Church*, p. 66.

⁵⁴ ‘STC Vision and Values’ <https://stthomascrookes.org/wp-content/uploads/STC-Vision-and-Values.pdf>; ‘Angela Tilby: Soul Survivor proves point of institutional Church’ <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2024/19-april/comment/columnists/angela-tilby-soul-survivor-proves-point-of-institutional-church> (d.d. 5 July 2024).

⁵⁵ ‘HTB network’ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HTB_network (d.d. 5 July 2024), newsletter ‘Friends of Revitalise Trust Summer Update’ (d.d. 4 July 2024).

⁵⁶ Such as HeartEdge, Fresh Expressions and (less explicitly) New Wine.

⁵⁷ Paas, *Church Planting in the Secular West*, p. 44; Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, pp. 5-6, 62-68, 233-234; Lord, *Network church*.

⁵⁸ The frequent use of the word ‘network’ itself is also relatively new. The Oxford English Dictionary shows, this is something of the past decades: ‘Network’ https://www.oed.com/dictionary/network_n?tl=true (5 July 2024).

⁵⁹ Such as monastic orders like the Franciscans and Jesuits, the Methodists in their early years and – more recently – the persecuted church in places like China and Iran. For the early church, see: Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, pp. 4-9; Thorpe, *Resource Churches*, pp. 35-40.

⁶⁰ ‘Get Connected’, <https://freshexpressions.org.uk/what-is-FX/our-story/> (d.d. 8 July 2024).

cross-denominational), whereas a network confines collaboration primarily to its own tribe.⁶¹ There are also examples of movements *within* a denomination, such as the Catholic Charismatic Renewal movement⁶², or regarding the church as a whole – at least ideally – as a Jesus-movement. According to this last view, articulated by Alan Hirsch, ‘movement’ is contrasted with ‘institution’ and ‘Christendom’ as the only truly healthy way of being church.⁶³

Ecology

Movements (and ‘inter-church-networks’) have been frequently connected to a set of vocabulary regarding a systems-view to the natural world, particularly ecology. To give a few examples:

- Hirsch regards it crucial for a Jesus-movement to acts as an ‘organic system’, extensively covering this topic in *The Forgotten Ways*.⁶⁴
- In *Serving a Movement* Tim Keller presents his vision of ‘A Gospel Ecosystem for a City’.⁶⁵
- In the past years the term ‘mixed economy’ has been transformed to ‘mixed ecology’ within the Church of England, becoming one of the three strategic priorities⁶⁶ and recently the topic of Ed Olsworth-Peter’s *Mixed Ecology: Inhabiting an Integrated Church*.⁶⁷

2.2. What is a network?

In the above discussion I have tried to highlight both the relevance and ambiguity regarding networks and related terms. To better understand networks, I propose to take a step back and ask: what actually *is* a network? Mark Newman answers the question as follows: “A network is, in its simplest form, a collection of points joined together in pairs by lines. [...] Many systems of interest in the physical, biological, and social sciences can be thought of as [...] networks and [...] thinking of them in this way can lead to new and useful insights.”⁶⁸

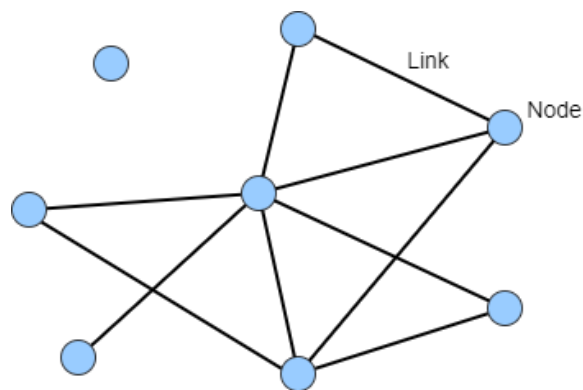


Figure 2.1: Example of a small network⁶⁹

⁶¹ Neil Powell & John James, *Together for the City: How Collaborative Church Planting Leads to Citywide Movements* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2019), p. 71.

⁶² ‘What is Catholic Charismatic Renewal?’ <https://www.ccr.org.au/about-ccr/what-is-catholic-charismatic-renewal> (d.d. 8 July 2024).

⁶³ Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, pp. 71, 81-82, 91-92, 228-229, 318-319.

⁶⁴ Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, pp. 216-260.

⁶⁵ Timothy Keller, *Serving a Movement: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), p. 242.

⁶⁶ ‘Vision and Strategy’ <https://www.churchofengland.org/about/vision-and-strategy> (8 July 2024).

⁶⁷ Ed Olsworth-Peter, *Mixed Ecology: Inhabiting an Integrated Church* (London: SPCK, 2024).

⁶⁸ Newman, *Networks*, p. 1.

⁶⁹ Based on a figure presented in: Newman, *Networks*, p. 1.

This implies that:

1. Networks are in essence very simple, consisting of two basic building blocks: nodes and links.⁷⁰ These together can be used to provide a simplified representation of reality “capturing only the basics of connection patterns and little else.”
2. Networks are above all a way of looking at the world, helping to understand the complexities of systems as a whole in a way otherwise impossible.⁷¹

What phenomenon is represented by nodes and links can differ widely. In the case of social networks nodes can represent individuals, groups of people or whole organizations; links can represent even more things like friendships, exchanges of goods or communication patterns, to name a few.⁷² These connections are all relatively abstract. There are also many networks with concrete physical connections, such as the internet – a highly complex network of routers and cables (visualized below).

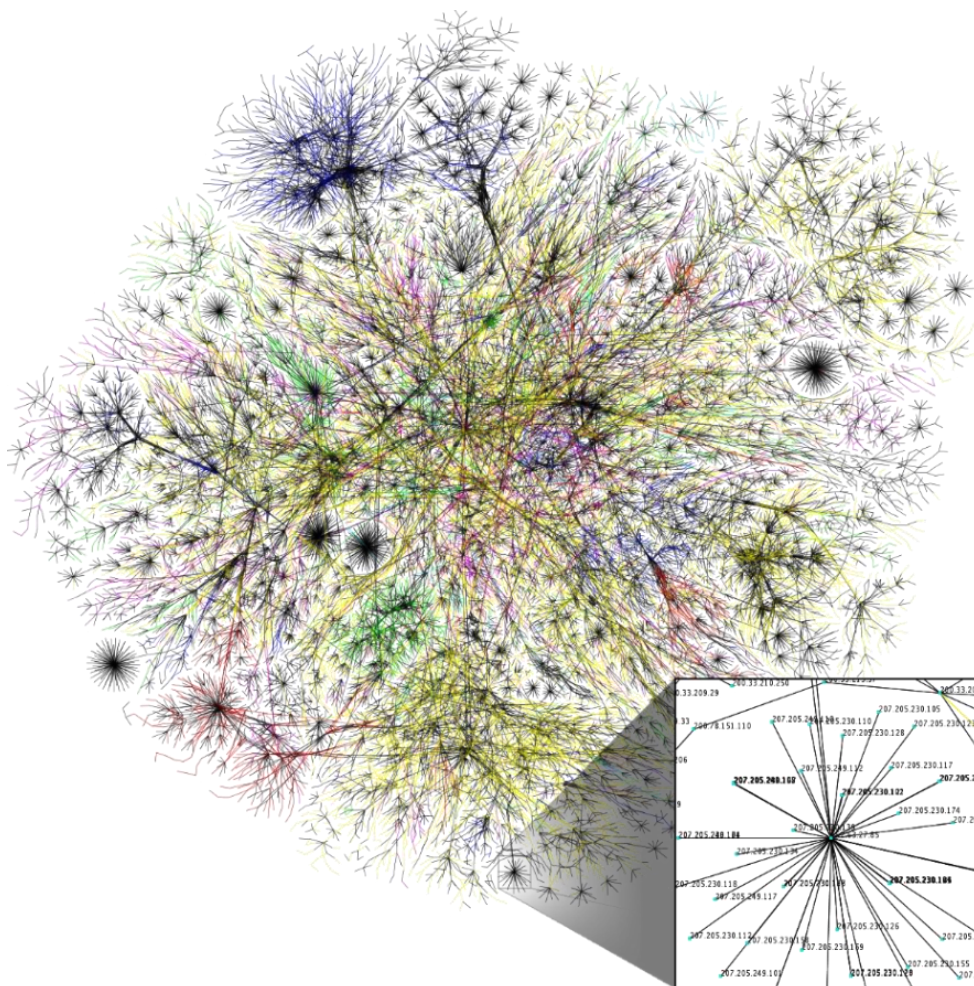


Figure 2.2: Partial structure of the internet, visualized by the Opte Project⁷³

⁷⁰ Or, instead of node: point, vertex, actor or site; instead of link: line, edge, connection, tie or bond. Newman, *Networks*, pp. 1, 47, 106; Newman, Barabási and Watts, *The Structure and Dynamics of Networks*, p. 1.

⁷¹ Newman, *Networks*, p. 7.

⁷² Newman, *Networks*, pp. 48-49.

⁷³ ‘Internet’ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Internet> (d.d. 27 July 2024). See also: ‘The Internet IPv4 vs IPv6’ <https://www.opte.org/the-internet> (27 July 2024).

2.3. Structure of networks

Being able to ‘read’ the structure of a network helps to understand its properties. I will first discuss some of the basic properties and apply them primarily to social networks (in the broad sense).

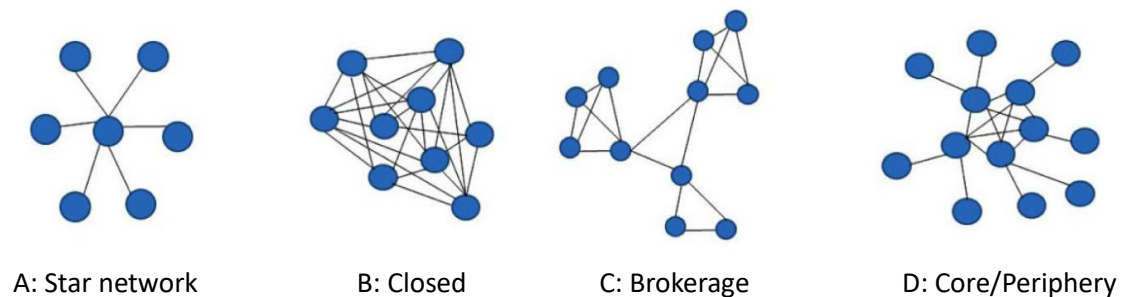


Figure 2.3 – Four ideal types of networks⁷⁴

The above figure shows a few ‘ideal type’ networks, that are helpful for understanding the properties of different network structures. Often these are related to the amount and distribution of the link.

- **Density** – how many links are there, compared to the maximum amount possible? (A is sparse, B is dense, C and D in between)
- **Balance** – how evenly are the links distributed?⁷⁵ (A is unbalanced, B is balanced, C and D in between)
- **Clustering** – are there any clusters of nodes with a relatively high density?⁷⁶ (A and B have no clusters, C has three, D has one)
- **Centralisation** – are there any central (clusters of) nodes? (A is very centralised, D is centralised, B and C decentralised)

Centrality – hubs

Whenever there is an uneven distribution of links in a network, certain nodes become relatively important, as they are better connected. This phenomenon, called **centrality**, is an important property for nodes. For example, in social networks the more central people are typically more influential, popular and/or powerful. There are different types of centrality measures, with each a different emphasis. In *The Human Network*, Matthew Jackson presents four different types of centrality:

- **Degree centrality**: popularity – how many connections (friends, acquaintances, followers, etc.) does somebody have?
- **Eigenvector Centrality**: connections (“it’s who you know”) – how well-positioned are the people that somebody is connected with?
- **Diffusion Centrality**: reach – how well-positioned is somebody to spread or receive information?
- **Betweenness Centrality**: brokerage and bridging – does somebody serve as a key bridge from one person or group to another?⁷⁷

When one node has a much higher centrality than other nodes it called a **hub**. Usually such nodes play a very important role in a network, keeping it robust and functioning properly.⁷⁸

⁷⁴ B. Nowell, T. Steelman, A.L.K Velez & Z. Yang, ‘The structure of effective governance of disaster response networks: Insights from the field.’, *The American Review of Public Administration* 7 (2018), pp. 699-715.

⁷⁵ Matthew O. Jackson, *The Human Network* (New York, NY: Vintage, 2020), p. 174.

⁷⁶ Newman, *Networks*, p. 10-11, 51.

⁷⁷ Jackson, *The Human Network*, p. 43. Cf. Newman, *Networks*, pp. 159-160.

⁷⁸ Newman, *Networks*, p. 9; Albert-László Barabási, *Linked* (New York: Perseus, 2002), pp. 71-72.

The term **social capital** is closely related to a person's centrality in one or more networks and can be defined as "the favours, resources, and information that a person can access from their network of social connections or as a result of their reputation." Especially a position that connects two different networks can be a great source of power and influence.⁷⁹

Links

Although in most network all links are depicted with a similar line, in real life some are much stronger than others. Perhaps surprisingly, relatively weak links may strengthen social capital disproportionately. This is the thesis of Mark Granovetter in his classic paper *The Strength of Weak Ties*. He argues that that actually the **weak ties** in a network are most valuable for obtaining important information or opportunities, as such ties are often with people from different clusters, whereas strong ties are often shared within a highly connected cluster. In other words: your friends likely know each other, but not all your acquaintances, resulting in a low chance of receiving new valuable information from a friend.⁸⁰ One aspect that impacts the strength of a link is distance. Although technology has made long-distance communication much easier nowadays, distance still affects the dynamics in a network.⁸¹ Perhaps a helpful way of distinguishing, is between **somewhere** (anchored in a specific location) and **anywhere** connections.⁸²

Networks can be **directed** or **undirected**. In other words: a link may represent something that is (potentially) mutual – such a relationship, or offering help – in which case the network is undirected. In other cases, the links represent a one-way movement, such as citations for academic papers, or hierarchies of animals that establish dominance over each other.⁸³

Dynamics

The structure of a network tends to evolve over time. Albert-László Barabási describes the dynamics of network structure formation in his book *Linked*. One important concept is **preferential attachment**: new nodes disproportionately often link to already well connected nodes. This phenomenon explains how hubs are formed and continue to grow; simply by being part of the network in an early stage helps to become more attractive to link with for newcomers (see figure 2.3).

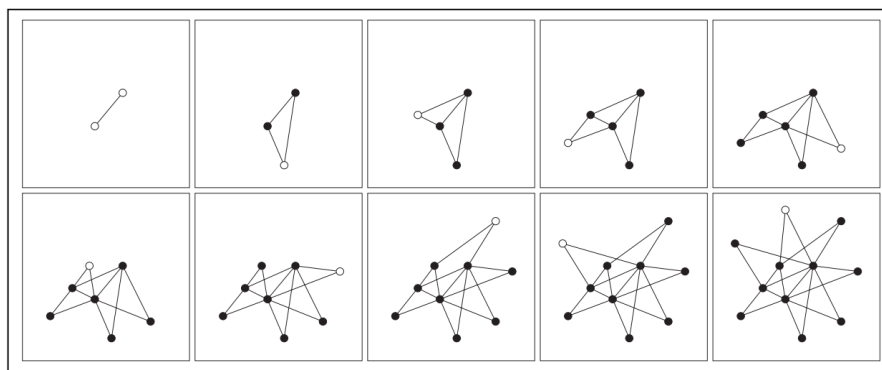


Figure 2.4: The growth of a network with preferential attachment⁸⁴

⁷⁹ Jackson, *The Human Network*, p. 139; Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, p. 502; Manuel Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope – Social Movements in the Internet Age (Second Edition)*, (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2015), pp. 8-9.

⁸⁰ Mark S. Granovetter, 'The Strength of Weak Ties', *Amer J. Sociol.* 6 (1973), p. 1361; Newman, *Networks*, p. 10.

⁸¹ Jackson, *The Human Network*, p. 58.

⁸² Powel and James, *Together for the City*, p. 38.

⁸³ Newman, *Networks*, pp. 4, 58.

⁸⁴ Barabási, *Linked*, p. 87.

For social networks this intuitively makes sense: the more popular, powerful or well-informed people tend to get new friends and acquaintances more easily (the ‘rich-get-richer phenomenon’). What may be less obvious, is that the most important thing those people may have to do, is to be *first*. Of course this is not always the case. Sometimes a new node appears that is very good at whatever the network signifies – which Barabási calls *fitness* – and therefore quickly grows in connections (the ‘new-kid-on-the-block effect’).⁸⁵

2.4. Social network dynamics

Some typically human phenomena drive the structures and dynamics of social networks. One element was already discussed earlier (in §2.3): the importance of well-connected people. When spreading something through a network – e.g. information, a virus, or innovation – the people that act as ‘hubs’ will have a disproportionately strong effect.⁸⁶ However, there are other phenomena that influence this. One such phenomenon is *homophily*, the tendency of humans to prefer others that are similar to them. One can easily imagine that a new person can more easily connect to a given network (thus have a higher ‘fitness’), when that person is relatively similar to the others. This phenomenon also explains how clusters (or communities) are formed in social networks, or how the boundaries of the network as a whole are determined.⁸⁷

Homophily is also important in the diffusion of complex behaviour of the network: whereas some things easily travel through networks, regardless of the homogeneity of it (viruses, or non-polarizing information),⁸⁸ sharing more complex information that requires a change of attitude of behaviour is much more difficult, thanks to homophily. In other words: people don’t want (or don’t dare) to think or behave in a different way, if nobody similar around them is doing the same. This has led social scientists to suggest that – when trying to bring about positive change to disadvantaged people – it is better to target a whole community at once, than using a more scattered approach.⁸⁹

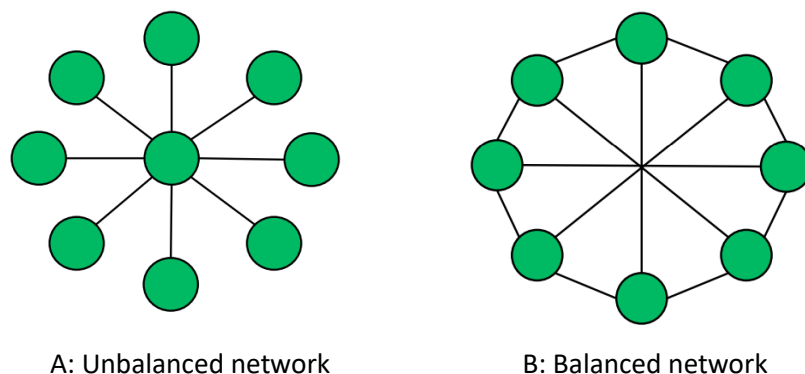


Figure 2.5: Two ideal type networks⁹⁰

For changing opinions, the shape of a network matters strongly. The more balanced a network (see figure above and §2.3), the easier change can diffuse through the network. In example A above, the central person will have an incredibly strong impact on change; change will not happen, unless the central person is either extremely humble *and* a good listener, or is the source of the change

⁸⁵ Barabási, *Linked*, pp. 93-107. Newman, Barabási and Watts, *The Structure and Dynamics of Networks*, p. 7.

⁸⁶ Barabási, *Linked*, pp. 131-135.

⁸⁷ Jackson, *The Human Network*, pp. 97, 111, 116.

⁸⁸ Barabási, *Linked*, pp. 131-132.

⁸⁹ Jackson, *The Human Network*, pp. 159, 223.

⁹⁰ Jackson, *The Human Network*, p. 174.

him/herself. Thanks to homophily, the opinion of the whole network will be biased towards that of the central person. In example B, change can come from any direction, as nobody dominates the network.⁹¹

If above discussions already highlight the importance of homophily, an analysis by Jackson can underline that further (and connect it to the analysis in *Mission-Shaped Church*, see §2.1):

We build networks around our professions, ethnicities, religions, and other common features that put us into more frequent and well-defined contact with each other. Instead of local geography defining our communities, we rely more directly on homophily and repeated contact to define our trusted circles of friends. Homophily also reinforces itself. People can better predict the behaviours and reactions of those close to themselves. They better understand the local culture and norms, and how they are expected to act in various circumstances. Although it lowers stress and helps people coordinate in their day-to-day lives, it also ends up increasing differences across groups, and making it relatively easier and safer to interact in one's own spheres.⁹²

If homophily is so important, a perhaps easily overlooked question is: homophily based on *what*?

Social identity

To better understand how homophily works – and how its dynamics can be influenced – it is important to understand one of its drivers: identity.⁹³ In *The New Psychology of Leadership*, Alexander Haslam, Stephen Reicher and Michael Platow discuss leadership in the light of social identity theory. An important concept in that regard is **self-categorization**. This refers to the process, where people move from “thinking about the self in terms of personal identity (as “I”) to thinking about the self in terms of social identity (as “we”).”⁹⁴ As people can have a wide variety of things in common, the question is: what aspect is it that an individual uses to self-categorize? (for instance ‘woman’, ‘black’, ‘mother’, ‘Londoner’, ‘Christian’ or ‘Arsenal-fan’)

Whatever it is, the dynamics associated with homophily will ensure that it becomes more and more important while being acted out, due to a process called **self-stereotyping**; the adjustment of behaviour, so that it is appropriate to the chosen identity. To use an example: if you self-categorise yourself as ‘Arsenal-fan’, what kind of behaviour fits with a ‘good’ Arsenal-fan? To be able to find this out, you will have to connect with people that are **prototypical** for that kind of identity, and try to mirror such people at least to a certain extent. Thanks to this dynamic an **in-group** and an **out-group** will emerge, where the cohesion within the in-group (‘us, Arsenal-fans’) increases, and the gap with the out-group (‘them, Chelsea-fans’) increases as well.⁹⁵

Although such processes inevitably take place, the outcome is not a given. Especially those leaders that are perceived by their peers to be **in-group champions** (by truly taking care of the interests of the group) have the possibility to **craft identity**. They can stretch the boundaries of a group, by redefining it according to a larger, more encompassing identity (To use the ‘Arsenal-fan’ example: the identity could be stretched to ‘Londoner-football-fans’ or – less pious, but more likely – ‘Manchester-City-haters’). In such a way, influential people in a certain group can affect the direction – of homophily of its members.⁹⁶

⁹¹ Jackson, *The Human Network*, pp. 196-197.

⁹² Jackson, *The Human Network*, p. 111.

⁹³ Jackson, *The Human Network*, p. 112.

⁹⁴ S. Alexander Haslam, Stephen D. Reicher and Michael J. Platow, *The New Psychology of Leadership – Identity, Influence and Power* (London: Routledge, 2020), p. 51.

⁹⁵ Haslam, Reicher and Platow, *The New Psychology of Leadership*, pp. 50-54, 78-79.

⁹⁶ See the chapter “Crafting a sense of us: Leaders as entrepreneurs of identity”, in Haslam, Reicher and Platow, *The New Psychology of Leadership*, pp. 122-143.

2.5. Organizational networks

Organizations consist of social networks, where hierarchy often plays an important role:

the network behind all twentieth century corporations has the same structure. It is a *tree*, where the CEO occupies the root and the bifurcating branches represent the increasingly specialized and nonoverlapping tasks of lower-level managers and workers. [...] The tree model is best suited for mass production. [...] These days, however, the value is in ideas and innovation.⁹⁷

This implies that – contrary to common opinion – a hierarchy is a network as well. It is a *tree*, “a connected, undirected network that contains no loop”. All nodes in the network can reach each other, but the path is typically very long.⁹⁸ In their book *Organisatienetwerken* (‘Organizational networks’) Patrick Kenis and Bart Cambré share a case study where the informal network is very different from the formal hierarchy: the highest ranked-official is not central; an accessible and knowledgeable colleague is much better connected.⁹⁹ Although less visible, the informal network may actually be stronger, as it is built on trust, friendship and natural authority.¹⁰⁰

Networks are not only formed *within* organizations, but also by linking multiple organizations, to obtain a certain common objective. In this sense, Kenis and Cambré identify three types of networks:

- **Learning network** – organizations share knowledge, information and expertise, often organized around certain events around relevant themes. The costs to participate are limited, organisations keep their independence, and the added value is typically that of new ideas.
- **Shared services** – collaboration to collectively create a product or service (such as common HR department or IT service), which is not a core activity of the organisations. The independence of the organizations is hardly reduced, as the network revolves around non-core activities. The added value is a higher efficiency.
- **Organizational network** – the most intensive form of collaboration, to obtain an objective that no organization could reach by itself (such as battling employment in an underprivileged region, or preventing child abuse). The collaborating partners engage with their core activities, sacrifice independence by acting interdependently. The added value is not efficiency, but effectiveness.¹⁰¹

For this last type of network, the chance of success is lowest, but the potential impact by far the highest. Choosing this type of network only makes sense when the challenge (or opportunity) is highly complex. “Complex questions need complex answers, like an organizational network. The more complex the question, the more complex the answer. And the lower the chance of success.”¹⁰² To increase the chance of success, two dimensions have to be maximized:

- **Differentiation** – this is about the composition of the network. Usually the participating organizations are very diverse (for profit, non-profit, volunteers, large, small, different backgrounds, etc.). The more diverse, the more powerful the network is.
- **Integration** – this is about the necessary coherence in the network. The higher the differentiation of participants, the bigger the challenge to ensure integration of the network.¹⁰³

⁹⁷ Barabási, *Linked*, p. 201.

⁹⁸ Newman, *Networks*, p. 121.

⁹⁹ Patrick Kenis and Bart Cambré, *Organisatienetwerken – de Organisatievorm van de toekomst* (Kalmthout: Pelckmans, 2019), pp. 34-35.

¹⁰⁰ Kenis and Cambré, *Organisatienetwerken*, p. 18.

¹⁰¹ Kenis and Cambré, *Organisatienetwerken*, pp. 56-57.

¹⁰² Translation mine. In Dutch: “Complexe vragen hebben nood aan complexe antwoorden, zoals een organisatienetwerk. Hoe complexer de vraag, hoe complexer het antwoord. En hoe kleiner de slaagkans.”. Kenis and Cambré, *Organisatienetwerken*, p. 72.

¹⁰³ Kenis and Cambré, *Organisatienetwerken*, pp. 73-74.

2.6. Complexity theory

A concept closely related to networks is *complexity*: “In most systems, complexity starts where networks turn nontrivial.”¹⁰⁴ Given the ubiquity and extensiveness of many networks, the emergence of complexity may not be surprising. Therefore it is worthwhile to touch upon systems thinking and complexity theory. According to Fritjof Capra and Pier Luigi Luisi, systems thinking is about moving away from a mechanistic understanding of reality (with a focus on the parts) to a holistic understanding (with a focus on the whole).¹⁰⁵ In other words: a part cannot be understood by taking it further apart; it has to be understood from the organization of the whole.¹⁰⁶

Likely the most intuitively understandable holistic phenomenon is life. When the separate parts of an organism cease to act together as a whole, we call it ‘dead’ (with as result a network with only nodes, and no links).¹⁰⁷ Many other systems can be considered ‘alive’ as well. Any kind of network that displays a certain kind of behaviour – *self-organization* – can be considered a *living system*.

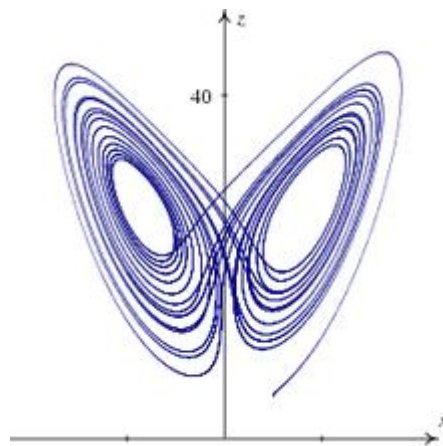


Figure 2.6: Illustration of a nonlinear system ('the butterfly effect')¹⁰⁸

What makes such systems *complex* is their non-linearity ('nonlinear dynamics')¹⁰⁹. An important elements of non-linear systems is *feedback*, often through many iterations. This causes

a surprising difference in cause-and-effect relationships. In linear systems, small changes produce small effects, and large effects are due either to large changes or to a sum of many small changes. In nonlinear systems, by contrast, small changes may have dramatic effects because they may be amplified repeatedly by self-reinforcing feedback. Such nonlinear feedback processes are the basis of the instabilities and the sudden emergence of new forms of order that are so characteristic of self-organization.¹¹⁰

In other words: small changes, through a unpredictable process, can result in enormous changes that bring about a new type of order. These dynamics of emergence are the basis for the innovation process (see §1.4 and §3.3).

¹⁰⁴ Barabási, *Linked*, p. 201.

¹⁰⁵ Fritjof Capra and Pier Luigi Luisi, *The Systems View of Life – A Unifying Vision* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 63.

¹⁰⁶ Capra and Luisi, *The Systems View of Life*, p. 66.

¹⁰⁷ “The essence of life is integration; namely the linking of various organs – heart and kidneys, brain and lungs, etc. – with one another. When this mutual linkage disappears, [...] the system is no longer an integrated unity, and death occurs.” Capra and Luisi, *The Systems View of Life*, p. 139.

¹⁰⁸ ‘Butterfly effect’ https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/butterfly_effect (d.d. 28 July 2024).

¹⁰⁹ Capra and Luisi, *The Systems View of Life*, p. 98.

¹¹⁰ Capra and Luisi, *The Systems View of Life*, pp. 105-106.

Margaret Wheatley and Deborah Frieze apply emergence to social innovation. In their article *Using Emergence to Take Social Innovation to Scale* they argue that “the world doesn’t change one person at a time. It changes as networks of relationships form among people who discover they share a common cause and vision of what’s possible.”¹¹¹ That happens through what they call *The Life Cycle of Emergence*:

- **Stage 1: Networks** – Networks, often fluid and open, are essential to find like-minded people.
- **Stage 2: Communities of practice** – Many small communities can spring from a network, where people share what they know, support each other, and are committed to one another.
- **Stage 3: Systems of influence** – Although unpredictable, suddenly a system appears that has real power and influence. “Pioneering efforts that hovered at the periphery suddenly become the norm.”¹¹²

The authors conclude that emergence as a change theory “offers methods and practices to accomplish the system-wide changes that are so needed at this time.”¹¹³

2.7. Movements

The above model likely describes the dynamics of a successful *movement*. In *Networks of Outrage and Hope*, Manuel Castells reflects on 2010s social movements, such as the Arab Spring and Occupy:

By sharing sorrow and hope in the free public space of the Internet, by connecting to each other [...] individuals formed networks, regardless of their personal views or organizational attachments. They came together. And their togetherness helped them to overcome fear [...] as they claimed their right to make history – their history – in a display of the self-awareness that has always characterised major social movements. The movements spread by contagion in a world networked by the wireless Internet and marked by fast, viral diffusion of images of ideas.¹¹⁴

These movements typically did not have any formal leaders, organization structure and connections with established institutions. As typical for social movements, they were acting as a kind of ‘counterpower’ against the established ‘networks of power’ (such as global financial, multimedia or political networks) producing “new values and goals around which the institutions of society are transformed”.¹¹⁵ In Alan Hirsch’ words, a movements “influence is spreading in opposition to the established order within which it originated”.¹¹⁶

Missiologist and missionary practitioner Gregory Leffel recognizes the similarities between social movements and Christian mission:

It is striking just how similar are the motivations, the visions for the future, and the experiences of social activists mobilizing social change and Christians deeply engaged in mission. [...] Both of our communities, for example, are committed to strongly held values. We both reach out to share our values, attract others, and thus build our movements. We build community to support, nurture and mobilize our members. We both labour in hope that our movements will ultimately change the consciousness of men and women throughout the world. We both live by faith in a future that redeems the present. And we both seek to realize within our present communities the promise and possibilities of what can be in the world to come [...] “To live like we’ve already won!”¹¹⁷

¹¹¹ Margaret Wheatley and Deborah Frieze, *Using Emergence to Take Social Innovation to Scale* (The Berkana Institute, 2006) <https://margaretwheatley.com/articles/using-emergence.pdf> (28 July 2024), p. 2.

¹¹² Wheatley and Frieze, *Using Emergence to Take Social Innovation to Scale*, pp. 5-6.

¹¹³ Wheatley and Frieze, *Using Emergence to Take Social Innovation to Scale*, p. 6.

¹¹⁴ Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope*, p. 2.

¹¹⁵ Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope*, pp. 4-9.

¹¹⁶ Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, p. 237.

¹¹⁷ Gregory P. Leffel, *Faith Seeking Action: Mission, Social Movements, and the Church in Motion* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2007), p. xviii.

2.8. Ecosystems

When many complex interaction between living organisms and other environmental elements – sources of material, nutrients and energy – form a more or less self-contained unit, one can speak of an ecosystem. This can be at the level of a specific natural area such as lake, a valley or an ocean, but can also take place at a much smaller scale, such as a human’s intestinal flora. An ecosystem can be conceptualized as multiple entangled networks that lead to complex patterns of interactions. Usually such ecological networks are quite abstract, such as *food webs* that capture predator-prey relationships.¹¹⁸

However, concrete interlocking of networks can also take place in an ecosystem, as Peter Wohlleben describes in his account of a forest ecosystem *The Hidden Life of Trees*. Not only are dead organisms a source of nutrients to others, living organisms share resources as well, thanks to all kind of underground networks. The roots of trees often connect to each other, resulting in a large network that enables nutrient sharing and even some kind of communication. An even more extensive type of network are fungal networks – the ‘wood wide web’ – that connect to the roots of many flora, enabling resource exchange and communication between different species. Despite all these means of collaboration, competition for light, water and other resources is fierce in a forest. Especially trees of different species compete with each other. Therefore, they to only tend to connect their root systems to trees of the same species, especially those with whom they have a strong connection, such as family members. It shows that homophily (see §2.4) is not an exclusively human phenomenon. Thanks to the ‘neutral’ fungal networks, competing species are made to collaborate at least to a certain extent, giving away excess nutrients at some moments, whilst at a different time (with different external circumstances) receiving them.¹¹⁹

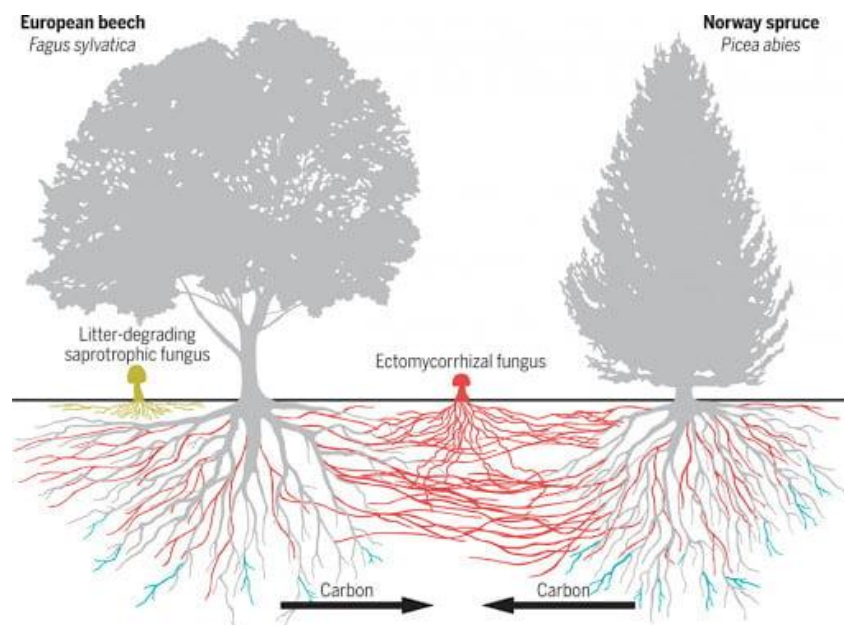


Figure 2.7: Interconnecting root and fungal networks¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ Newman, *Networks*, pp. 95-96; Jaboury Ghazoul, *Ecology: A very short introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 17, 47, 64-65.

¹¹⁹ Peter Wohlleben, *The Hidden Life of Trees* (Vancouver: Greystone, 2016), pp. 1-18, 113-124, 247-250.

¹²⁰ 'How Do Trees Talk With Each Other? (Mycorrhizal Network Explained)', <https://get-green-now.com/how-do-trees-talk-with-each-other-mycorrhizal-network-explained/> (d.d. 17 August 2024).

A forest ecosystem not only benefits the species itself: it can strongly contribute to its environment by “contributing to the formation of soils, [...] slowing erosion [and] regulating temperature and precipitation.” The above discussion illustrates how diversity and complexity make an ecosystem more robust and adaptable to changing circumstances; a principle that has more often been observed in ecology.¹²¹

The idea of ecosystems as “dynamic, resilient and functional whole, with a lot of interaction” has made it a popular metaphor for organizations to use, according to Kenis and Cambré. “What is specific for an ecosystem is the concept of *asynchronous reciprocity*: whoever gives something, will also receive something back, but likely from a different part of the network.”¹²²

2.9. What does this mean for the church?

I am now able to answer the first sub question: *What properties of networks are relevant for an ecclesial context?* The answer to this question is tenfold:

- First, it is important to realize that networks are primarily a way of looking at reality. This implies that in *any* ecclesial setting a ‘network lens’ may be beneficial.
- Second, this chapter has demonstrated that also ‘inherited’ elements of church, such as the church hierarchy, can be conceived of as a network with its own specific properties. On all levels, in all types of churches, social networks are present, with particular structures and dynamics.
- Third, when looking at individual elements of the network, properties can be identified that are relevant, such as centrality, the strength of connections, and social capital. These can be applied to individuals, but also churches and church networks.
- Fourth, when looking at the network as a whole, the structure – including the presence of hubs – has a strong influence on diffusion of information and behavioural change (which is relevant for both mission and internal purposes).
- Fifth, dynamics in social networks are strongly influenced by homophily. From a missional perspective it highlights the importance of a diversity of ecclesial communities, to be able to connect with very different people; from an ecclesial perspective it helps to understand why relatively homogeneous ‘networks of new things’ provide added value to participants.
- Sixth, the power of identity-language in shaping the behaviour of people can be a resource for church leaders to enable the connection between people – both in and outside the church – that were previously distant from each other.
- Seventh, the idea of organizational networks highlights the benefit of intentional collaboration between a very diverse set of organizations, both in- and outside the church, to take on complex (missional) challenges.
- Eighth, complexity theory and the dynamics of emergence can be very helpful in understanding and supporting movement dynamics in the church – something that may be crucial for mission.
- Ninth, ecology and systems thinking provide a rich framework of thinking for the church that highlights the importance of diversity and interdependence, not only to the benefit of parts of the system and the system as a whole, but also for the wider environment.
- Tenth, a suggestion with a caveat, as it a systematic theological consideration for which I don’t have the space to develop a proper argument. Nevertheless it is a question worth pondering: if a ‘network lens’ can be fruitful for highlighting all kind of structures and dynamics regarding human beings and the church, could it perhaps be also fruitful in shedding light on the Triune God that created us in His own image, came to dwell amongst us, and promised to be with us always...?

¹²¹ Ghazoul, *Ecology*, pp. 65, 91-93.

¹²² Kenis and Cambré, *Organisatienetwerken*, p. 32.

Chapter 3: Missional ecclesiological perspectives

3.1. Sharpening the lens

The end of the previous chapter highlighted the versatility and depth that the use of a 'network lens' can bring for reflection on ecclesial practice, including mission. With this chapter I hope to sharpen the lens through six different missional ecclesiological 'conversation partners'. Three of them – Michael Moynagh, Ric Thorpe and Sam Wells – are closely connected to one of the networks that are the focal point of this research and can safely be considered their 'house theologian'. The other three bring a valuable outside perspective, with Stefan Paas providing a very helpful framework in distinguishing church planting dynamics, Alan Hirsch having an articulate perspective on movement dynamics for the church and Tim Keller offering the holistic view of a 'gospel ecosystem' for a city.

3.2. Stefan Paas – church planting dynamics

In his book *Church Planting in the Secular West*, Stefan Paas shows how the meaning of church planting has evolved considerably during the past centuries. He identifies four different motives for church planting that each emerged during a particular period, and currently co-exist within the church, often intertwined:¹²³

1. **Planting the church** – The term church planting originates from the Latin *plantatio ecclesiae*, which refers to the activity of the church in the so-called mission fields, and throughout most of Christian history referred to "the institution of the church in areas where institutional Christianity was not present, usually after a pioneer stage of evangelization and gathering". From this perspective, *the church* can be planted only once in a given area; all other activity that follows (including establishing new Christian communities) is considered something else. Such a view is currently still held in parts of the church, particularly among Roman Catholics.¹²⁴
2. **Planting better churches** – As a result of the Reformation, *the church* became divided into denominations. This resulted in the phenomenon of establishing different churches in already Christianised territory. In other words, there was a move from planting *the church* to the planting of *churches*, motivated by the desire for a higher confessional purity around themes such as baptism, eschatology, personal faith and holiness. Starting with the Anabaptist movement in the early 16th century, this has been a major motivation for groups like the Baptists, Methodists and Neo-Pentecostals up until today, frequently combined with a revivalist approach.¹²⁵
3. **Planting more churches** – Given the perceived challenge of rapid world evangelization around the 1950s, Church Growth theory emerged. Leading voice Donald McGavran reflected on rapidly expanding church-movements in the developing world and translated this to a Western context. Instead of confessional purity, now measurable numerical growth was considered the sign of a faithful church.¹²⁶ To ensure maximum growth, church planting was regarded critical, as is evident in the oft-repeated claim by Peter Wagner: "The single most the single most effective evangelistic methodology under heaven is planting new churches."¹²⁷ The reasoning is that planting more churches will lead to a higher number of converts, and therefore to numerical growth of church

¹²³ Paas, *Church Planting in the Secular West*, p. 2.

¹²⁴ Paas, *Church Planting in the Secular West*, pp. 2-3, 16.

¹²⁵ Paas, *Church Planting in the Secular West*, pp. 32, 62-88, 101-102.

¹²⁶ Paas, *Church Planting in the Secular West*, pp. 38-39, 113, 115. Cf. Donald McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*. Third edition, revised and edited by C. Peter Wagner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), pp. 1-19.

¹²⁷ C. Peter Wagner, *Church Planting for a Greater Harvest* (Ventura: Regal, 1990), p. 11. Quoted in: Paas, *Church Planting in the Secular West*, p. 114.

as a whole. This is driven by the idea that newly established, relatively small and uniform (the 'homogeneous unit principle') churches grow fastest, and that a supply of many new churches on the 'religious market' will mean that more people find a 'niche' that fits their taste. Even the existing churches will benefit, because the increased competition challenges them to be more competitive themselves. As this approach is pragmatic and 'confessionally neutral', it has been popular across a wide spectrum of evangelical churches.¹²⁸ Church Growth theory is closely related to what Paas calls an 'engineering' or 'scientific' approach to mission, which "was seen as a human task, involving all the skills of human planning and rationality" and required "effective and efficient strategies or methods" to achieve the goal of world evangelization. Recently Church Growth theory has come under criticism, amongst others because it tends to instrumentalize the church, and its claim of being the most effective means of evangelization may be exaggerated.¹²⁹

4. **Planting new churches** – Around the turn of the century, the crisis of Western Christianity made many to turn their hope to "the development of alternative, experimental, new communities of faith".¹³⁰ Especially in highly secularized areas like Western Europe, such new Christian communities may be places of hope and creativity amidst all uncertainty, and have the potential to be a source of renewal for the wider church, "just like the Christian monasteries in the Dark Ages became seedbeds of cultural renewal after the collapse of the Western Roman empire".¹³¹

Innovation and unity

This last type of church planting is clearly the most credible justification for church planting in Europe according to Paas.¹³² One important reason, is that such types of church plants may be beneficial for the church as a whole. This requires two, not necessarily easy to combine, elements together: innovation and unity. Paas provides several recommendations to ensure this can actually happen:

- A helpful attitude for dealing with the "depth and complexity of the crisis of Western Christianity" is to regard fellow Christian with very different backgrounds as partners in 'the quest for renewal'. When people network and cooperate with such an attitude, unexpected combinations of perspectives may produce genuine renewal.
- The task of every new Christian community is first and foremost to concentrate on "witnessing to Jesus Christ and making disciples" in its own context, which may bring the community "in a steep learning curve toward innovation".
- As such innovation is to be regarded on behalf of the whole church, it is crucial that church plants have good connections with other churches – both the sending church and local churches.
- There should be unity among churches that is visible to outsiders, and lived out by insiders, for instance through mutual accountability between older and newer churches.¹³³

To ensure a good embedding of innovation into larger denominations, an *incubator* approach may be helpful. This is a relatively structured approach "organized and supported by the power centre in order to create innovation at its own margin". The benefit for innovators is that they receive resources and training, but an obvious tension exists with the bureaucratic requirements from the centre. To make such a setup work, skilful mediators between both worlds are crucial; "pressed on

¹²⁸ Paas, *Church Planting in the Secular West*, pp. 113, 115, 120-121, 143.

¹²⁹ Paas, *Church Planting in the Secular West*, pp. 34, 37-39, 165, 180.

¹³⁰ Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st Century Church* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003), quoted in Paas, *Church Planting in the Secular West*, p. 182.

¹³¹ Paas, *Church Planting in the Secular West*, p. 200.

¹³² Paas, *Church Planting in the Secular West*, p. 264.

¹³³ Paas, *Church Planting in the Secular West*, pp. 108-109, 183, 193, 224.

one side by the institutional laws of hierarchy, and on the other side by the inevitable anarchy of self-starting pioneers, these workers must be real artists of balance”. However, if these mediators find such a balance, this may be very fruitful as “the largest innovative gain will probably be drawn from the hermeneutic discoveries by those who travel in-between the pioneers and bureaucrats”.¹³⁴

3.3. Michael Moynagh – ecclesial innovation

The theologian most closely associated with Fresh Expressions is Michael Moynagh.¹³⁵ His book *Church for Every Context* is a well-known introduction to the theology and practice of new forms of church such as Fresh Expressions. The follow-up *Church in Life* provides an in-depth reflection on the dynamics of these emerging communities, using an innovation framework. In both books a definition is given for new ecclesial communities. These are understood to be:

- **Missional** – meant for people who do not normally attend church
- **Contextual** – they seek to serve their context
- **Formational** – their leaders aim to make disciples
- **Ecclesial** – their leaders intend to become church for the people they reach¹³⁶

Often such communities contain a surprising combination of church with something else, such as mess (Messy Church) or being in a forest (Forest Church).¹³⁷

Typically they are formed using a *servicing-first journey* which means the founders of a new community are – led by the Spirit – listening to their context, find ways to love and serve people, build community with them, help people to explore following Jesus, encourage those coming to faith to ‘taste church’, and occasionally repeat the process, all resting ‘on a carpet of prayer’¹³⁸



Figure 3.1: A serving-first journey¹³⁹

¹³⁴ Paas, *Church Planting in the Secular West*, pp. 233, 239.

¹³⁵ Cf. Moynagh, *Church in Life*, p. 14.

¹³⁶ Moynagh, *Church in Life*, p. 3; cf. Michael Moynagh, *Church for Every Context* (London: SCM, 2012), p. xiv.

¹³⁷ Moynagh, *Church in Life*, p. 21.

¹³⁸ Moynagh, *Church in Life*, p. 44.

¹³⁹ ‘The Fresh Expressions Journey’ <https://freshexpressions.org.uk/get-equipped/the-fresh-expressions-journey/>, (d.d. 24 July 2024).

Such a process can be considered an ‘incarnational’ form of mission, as it is about establishing a church-like presence in the midst of daily life, to best reach people with little or no church background. It can be contrasted with an ‘attractional’ form of mission, where people are invited to come to an existing congregation. This is what often happens for Church Growth influenced church planting, where typically a *worship-first journey* is used (see figure below)¹⁴⁰

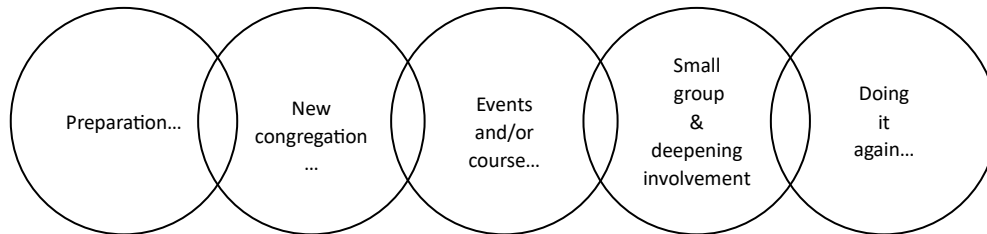


Figure 3.2: A worship-first journey¹⁴¹

For Moynagh such model-based approach to church planting “can feel a little mechanical, but it has borne fruit in a number of contexts. It is a far cry, however, from the birthing of many new ecclesial communities. These tend to emerge organically, on a trial-and-error basis.”¹⁴²

Innovation framework

The central feature of *Church in Life* is ‘an emergent framework of innovation’ rooted in complexity thinking (see §2.6) that has a clear theological rationale grounded in Moltmann’s theology of hope:¹⁴³

The processes of the framework are used by the Spirit to bring aspects of the coming kingdom into the here and now. Through innovation, the Spirit makes God’s promised reign more tangible in the church’s life. As a result, the church is changed – its identity moves on – and so are the lives of the people whom it serves. The Spirit enables the potentialities of God’s future to transform the actualities of the present.¹⁴⁴

The framework contains six elements which “are not sequential stages, but processes that coexist and intertwine with each other”. This framework can be used to understand the emergence of new ecclesial communities, but also dynamics of renewal on the level of a local church, network of churches, or even denomination.¹⁴⁵

- **Dissatisfaction** – a growing realization that ‘business as usual’ does not work. It is crucial for the process as it will generate the motivation to get going. It may be considered ‘holy discontent’, a call from God.
- **Exploration** – as a response to dissatisfaction, alternatives are explored that bring knowledge by doing it (which is the other way around vs. planning!). Usually improvisation is an important element, which includes bringing together two concepts that have not been combined before and may produce an innovation.
- **Sense-making** – as change emerges through ‘act and reflect’, it is important to make sense of what is happening. The language that is used matters, as this forms and expresses the underlying

¹⁴⁰ Moynagh, *Church in Life*, pp. 4, 39-40.

¹⁴¹ Moynagh, *Church in Life*, p. 39.

¹⁴² Moynagh, *Church in Life*, p. 19.

¹⁴³ Moynagh, *Church in Life*, pp. 28-29, 63, 391, 415. This is a move away from the incarnational approach favoured in ‘fresh expressions circles’. Cf. p. 415.

¹⁴⁴ Moynagh, *Church in Life*, p. 29.

¹⁴⁵ Moynagh, *Church in Life*, pp. 28-29, 99, 413.

mindset of the organization. It is crucial that a good story is created, as “the better the story, the easier it is to win the argument for change – to bring the present into closer correspondence with God’s promised future.”

- **Amplification** – stories travel along networks, and may result in positive feedback loops that amplify its impact. “Like a snowball, a new idea or practice gains influence as it rolls through the system and gathers support.” Amplification is more likely when individuals are encouraged to interact more, which is especially the case in information-rich networks. “The key principle behind amplification is that small things can have large effects. Like a mustard seed, the future kingdom grows in the present from small beginnings.”
- **Edge of chaos** – this is about combining agility with stability. “There is neither so much change that the system cannot cope, nor so little that it cannot adapt.” An important source of stability amidst change is path dependency, which ensures that the path that been travelled is taken into account. This implies a new story is rooted within the pre-existing one.
- **Transformation** – the outcome of this process will be a degree of transformation. This typically involves a higher, more complex level of organization, that is better suited to the adaptive challenges of a complex society. In term of complexity thinking: “a new attractor – a new direction of travel – emerges and transforms the lives of those involved. The attractor reflects the gravitational pull of God’s approaching reign.”¹⁴⁶

Self-giving

The reason for establishing new ecclesial communities should not only be as a response to church decline. Even if the church was growing, there would be good theological reasons, with self-giving as central motive: “we would still be called to give these communities away [as] self-giving is the pulse of God’s love, and the church is to correspond to God”, becoming an echo of “Christ’s self-giving to and for the world”. This contrasts with the multiplication or reproduction language that is commonly used, where actually the church is central. “But if we say, ‘Let’s give the church away’, the focus shifts towards the people to whom the church is given” and the activity becomes much more relational.¹⁴⁷

3.4. Ric Thorpe – church planting hubs

As the Church of England’s bishop for church planting, and previously being part of the HTB network, Ric Thorpe is deeply involved in church planting practice within the Church of England, in particular the establishment of *resource churches*. These are a key part of his church planting strategy, and the subject of his eponymous book on the subject. He provides a definition: “A resource church is designated by its bishop to be a church-planting church which trains leaders to resource and support mission across a diocese.”¹⁴⁸ Such type of churches have emerged from the HTB-network, with St Peter’s Brighton as first example inducing further reflection on this type of church.

Around the time of its conception, the term ‘city-centre church-planting hub churches’¹⁴⁹ was used, revealing the network-thinking behind this type of church. The conscious creation of new hubs within a church-planting network may indeed be the most distinguishing feature of resource churches. Another unique element is the explicit mentioning of the role of bishops as one of the core elements of resource churches. According to Thorpe, a resource church is:

¹⁴⁶ Moynagh, *Church in Life*, pp. 29-36, 93-94, 112, 114, 129, 409, 413.

¹⁴⁷ Moynagh, *Church in Life*, p. 414.

¹⁴⁸ Thorpe, *Resource Churches*, p. 9.

¹⁴⁹ Ric Thorpe, *City-centre Resource Churches: Training to enable planting* (Dissertation, Ashbury Theological Seminary, 2020) <https://ccx.org.uk/content/city-centre-training/> (d.d. 24 July 2024), pp. 96-97.

1. **Authorised by the diocesan bishop** – only the bishop can canonically “designate a church as resource church, because its calling and ministry goes beyond its own parochial boundaries”. The specific vocation of a resource church is “to plant new churches and revitalise existing ones that lie in other parishes so that those churches can thrive in sharing the good news of Jesus to a world desperately in need of his love and grace.”
2. **Part of a diocesan strategy to evangelise a city or town and transform society** – resource churches play a central role as “bishops and their senior teams can utilise their evangelistic and missional energy and resources to greater effect by directing them strategically to places of opportunity and need.” This results in a much more equal and interdependent relationship between resource church leaders and bishops, as resource churches “can be part of the solution to some of the challenges they face, reversing decline and seeing the Church grow again.”
3. **Intentionally resourced to plant and revitalise churches** – ideally dioceses direct resources and planting curates to resource churches “where they learn their trade before being sent to plant or revitalise other churches, taking a team and funding with them. Over time, those churches are renewed and begin to thrive, and that new mission energy impacts other churches so that the whole Church begins to grow.” It is vitally important that a resource church plants other churches, because only then “the investment made now will give a return in the future, in terms of new believers, stronger parishes, better maintained church buildings, and increased financial giving.”
4. **Actively develops a pipeline of leaders for further planting** – resource churches considered excellent environments for developing leaders, increasing the number of vocations to ordained ministry and forming people to plant churches themselves.
5. **Provides other resources for mission across their city or town** – resource churches should give generously to the wider Church, through for instance “training courses in leadership, family life and relationship courses, evangelistic courses like the Alpha course, running debt advice or food bank ministries.”¹⁵⁰

Thorpe provides a theological underpinning for resource churches, based on:

- **The Bible** – the biblical roots of resource churches are in “the great sending churches of the early church” such as Antioch and Ephesus that were planted, and subsequently planted churches themselves, developing leaders in the process. The authorizing role of the bishop is rooted in the New Testament church as well.
- **Previous missional reflection within the Church of England** – the *Five Marks of Mission*, reports like *Mission Shaped-church*, and the ‘vision statement’ where the Church of England describes itself as “A Christian presence in every community”, provide both challenge and guidance.
- **Church Growth theory** – this becomes evident in a sentences like “Reversing decline means seeking growth”, “A strategic approach to mission must include multiplication” and referencing McGavran and Wagner, including the famous line “The single most effective evangelistic methodology under heaven is planting new churches”.
- **Missio Dei** – according to Thorpe, the self-giving generosity is one of the core values of resource churches, and flows from the character and nature of God. This is closely connected to his mission. “One of the great encouragements for the church is that God is already at work. He is on mission and invites us to join in with him. The *missio Dei* means that God is always taking the initiative and we can experience the joy of discovering that he has gone before us.”¹⁵¹

¹⁵⁰ Thorpe, *Resource Churches*, pp. 9-12.

¹⁵¹ Thorpe, *Resource Churches*, pp. 35- 45; Thorpe, *City-centre Resource Churches: Training to enable planting*, pp. 53, 62, 197.

3.5. Sam Wells – sharing abundance

The most atypical resource church within the Church of England is undoubtedly St Martin-in-the-Fields.¹⁵² It is not planting churches, but inspiring existing churches to adopt a similar model as itself through the HeartEdge network and the writings of Sam Wells.

In *A Future that's Bigger than the Past* he discusses his vision for church renewal, which revolves around integrating the 4Cs Commerce, Culture, Compassion and Congregation, underpinned by a changed conception of salvation. Whilst before the human problem was regarded (1) death or (2) sin and evil, with as 'solution in Jesus' (1) eternal life or (2) the forgiveness of sins, Wells offers an alternative where:

- “the human problem is isolation;
- the jeopardy we're placed in by isolation is that we fail to come anywhere near realizing our own potential or enjoying the gift of one another; and
- the solution God offers us in Jesus is to show us the heart of God and the paradigm of abundant life.”¹⁵³

Whilst assuring he does not want to diminish the other two conceptions, a focus on this new soteriology would finally make God a means in itself, putting the focus of Christianity right as it is “fundamentally about cultivating the assets of grace and joy and only secondarily about eradicating the deficits of sin and death.” This also gives a significantly different perspective on the world, as that has now “a validity of its own. All has not been lost in the Fall. The Holy Spirit is doing surprising, exuberant and plentiful things in the world. The church is called not simply to guide people's escape from the world, but to celebrate creation, enjoy culture and share in flourishing life.” This “abundant-life approach seeks to shape communities whose habits and practices anticipate and portray the life of God's kingdom.”¹⁵⁴ The means of living out these kingdom communities is by the integration of four usually separated domains:

- **Commerce** – generating finance via enterprise, creatively extending mission
- **Culture** – art, music, performance re-imagining the Christian narrative for the present
- **Compassion** – empowering congregations to address social need
- **Congregation** – inclusive liturgy, worship and common life.¹⁵⁵

The calling for churches can be summarized as being an institution that is a blessing. This happens when church buildings are transformed into “dynamic centres of abundant life, receiving, evidencing, dwelling in and sharing forms of social flourishing and being a blessing to their neighbourhood”. When communities act like this, and walk with other communities that seek to do the same, a movement is born “whose ambition [is] no more and no less than to be a blessing to others and to help others bless others, and so imitate the action of God in Christ and anticipate the kingdom.”¹⁵⁶

¹⁵² Thorpe, *Resource Churches*, pp. 145-146.

¹⁵³ Wells, *A Future that's Bigger than the Past*, p. 4.

¹⁵⁴ Wells, *A Future that's Bigger than the Past*, pp. 5-6.

¹⁵⁵ These 4Cs are worked out in separate chapters in *A Future that's Bigger than the Past*. The summary I show here is from 'HeartEdge inspires churches to develop the 'four Cs'', <https://www.heartedge.org/about> (d.d. 25 July 2024).

¹⁵⁶ Wells, *A Future that's Bigger than the Past*, p. 9-10, 16, 158.

3.6. Alan Hirsch – church as Jesus-movement

In contrast to Wells pledge for the renewal of the church as institution, Alan Hirsch argues against any form of institutionalism with the Church.¹⁵⁷ In *The Forgotten Ways* he sharply contrasts the church as an institution with the pre-Constantine church that was a ‘Jesus-movement’, arguing that the original movement dynamics of the early church should be rediscovered. In his view the movement DNA (mDNA) is still latently present in every church, and when this ‘founders mindset’ is unleashed, it will result in spectacular growth of a more “fluid, adaptive, and dynamic movement-based form of *ecclesia*” like in the Chinese underground churches.¹⁵⁸ This mDNA consists of six elements:

- **Jesus is Lord** – at its heart the church should be a Jesus-movement. Therefore the lordship of Jesus is *the* fundamental mDNA element.
- **Disciple making** – drawing people to Christ, and making them like Christ as core task of the church (away from consumerism).
- **Missional-Incarnational Impulse** – “the dynamic outward thrust and the related deepening impulse – which together *seed* and *embed* the gospel into different cultures and people groups” (away from the attractional church model).
- **Liminality and Communitas** – challenge or even crisis is actually good for the a church, and forges strong connections between people (*communitas*).
- **APEST Culture** – a culture where all five functions-ministries, apostle, prophet, evangelist, shepherd and teacher are actively present (instead of only the last two, as happens in many churches).
- **Organic Systems** – appropriate structures for growth and movement, as “exemplary Jesus movements have the feel of a movement and the structure of a network, and tend to spread like viruses” (not being blocked by centralizing institutions).¹⁵⁹

Hirsch presents this clearly as an integrated whole. Some of these elements are worth highlighting:

Movement structure

The structure and organization of a movement are extremely important, to be able to maintain growth over time and distance. “Structures are either movement killers or movement enhancers. The answer to what is blocking or what is enhancing the cause of the movement is in the system as a whole and not just in its parts.” This means a right balance should be found: sufficient structure to ensure the sustainability of the movement, but not to the extent that growth is blocked. The question is then, how networks actually hold together. “The effective performance of a network over time and distance will depend to a large degree on the cultivation of shared beliefs, principles, interests, and goals—perhaps articulated in an overarching ideology. This combination of beliefs and principles forms the cultural glue, or reference point, that holds the nodes together and to which the members subscribe in a deep way.”¹⁶⁰

Leadership

To enable this, the leaders of a movement play a crucial role. First of all, the leadership has to ensure that meaningful interrelationships exist between the various elements, so that the church gets relationally networked. This network can enable the formation of a *web of meaning*, consisting of a common vision and purpose – a shared identity. Making this happen is especially the task for

¹⁵⁷ Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, p. xxvi, xxxiii, 10-11, 59.

¹⁵⁸ Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, pp. xxii-xxv, 8, 79-81, 91, 110.

¹⁵⁹ Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, pp. xxiii, xxviii, 12-13, 90, 107, 110, 114.

¹⁶⁰ Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, pp. 220, 228, 245.

apostolic leaders, who have the crucial role as catalysts for the movement: ensuring such a “sense of common meaning and purpose both initiates movements and keeps burgeoning networks together.” An important part of the identity, is to remain open to the outside world. “New religious movements fail when they become closed or semi-closed networks. For continued exponential growth, a movement must maintain open relationships with outsiders. They must reach into new, adjacent social networks.”¹⁶¹

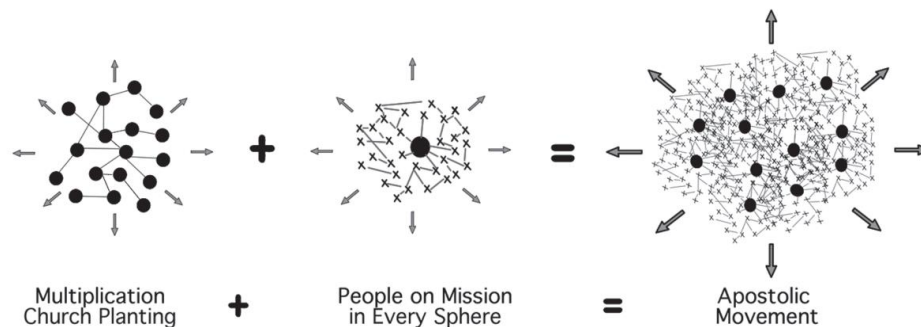


Figure 3.3: Conceptual illustration of an apostolic movement¹⁶²

Living system structures

Movements can be regarded *dynamic systems* that in a certain sense can even be regarded *living*, which means a significant shift away from linear thinking towards thinking in terms of dynamic systems. “In a system, all the disparate elements are dynamically and irrevocably *interrelated* and *interdependent*. Everything is happening at once. In systems we need to see things in terms of their wholeness”. What is crucial for such as a living system, is to stay away from equilibrium, by cultivating (not just tolerating) adaptability in its internal structure. Combined with a continuing openness to its environment, this will make the system best suited to be able to react to a threat or compelling opportunity: “living things move toward the edge of chaos.” This is exactly what is – and should! – be happening now in many churches, given the challenging conditions in many contexts.¹⁶³

Hybrid structures for denominations

Hirsch recognizes that a complete *unleashing* of all six elements of mDNA these six elements will not be realistic for most denominations in the West.¹⁶⁴ Therefore “most churches in Western contexts will likely be mostly hybrids of the adaptive and operational forms of church rather than purely movemental in form.” A strategic area of focus will be networking, as “in the network structure, power and responsibility are diffused throughout the organization and not concentrated at the centre.” This prevents the “encroachment of religious institutionalism due to centralization of power and function.”

For this to happen, apostolic leadership is required, but now *within* a denomination “to call the denomination away from maintenance, back to mission.” To enable such a restructuring of the institutions of a denomination, the apostolic leader has to be visionary, able to outlast significant opposition from within, build alliances with others that are supporting change, and raise a new generation of leaders.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶¹ Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, pp. 152, 195-197, 305.

¹⁶² Alan Hirsch, ‘Reflection on Movement Dynamics’ in Timothy Keller, *Serving a Movement*, p. 248.

¹⁶³ Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, pp. 176, 225.

¹⁶⁴ Although Hirsch recognizes – to his surprise – that a lot has happened since the first edition of his book was published. One notable example that he mentions is “Fresh Expressions (FX), a training system and movement within established denominations” Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, p. 63.

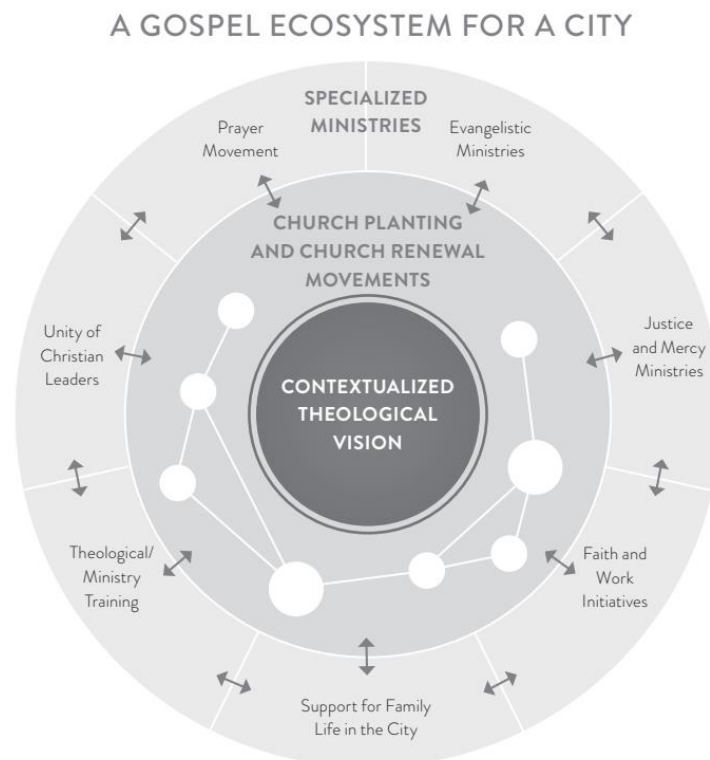
¹⁶⁵ Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, pp. 193-194, 225, 228.

3.7. Tim Keller – gospel ecosystem

One example of established churches acting as movement is the City to City network, an initiative from Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City.¹⁶⁶ Its founder and long-time leader Tim Keller has devoted a book on this topic: *Serving a Movement*¹⁶⁷ He argues that movement dynamics¹⁶⁸ can (and should) take place in a local church, but should be much wider: a coalition of multiple churches and ministries should together form a citywide movement, with a strong emphasis on church planting. Such a movement is outrightly ecumenical, as

no one kind of church – no church model or theological tradition – can reach an entire city. Reaching a city requires a willingness to work with other churches, even churches that hold to different beliefs and practices – a view sometimes called ‘catholicity’.

Such unity is crucial, as “unity is not simply the work of the Spirit but the very instrument through which the Spirit works.” Therefore a dynamic of cooperation is required “that encourages people of different temperaments and perspectives to come together around their common vision and goals. [...] If this bias for cooperation is absent in a city, the movement dynamic typically stalls or erodes.”¹⁶⁹ In Keller’s view a gospel city movement cannot be produced; it is the result of both human contribution *and* the sovereign will of God in and for a particular city. Therefore “we cannot produce a gospel movement without the providential work of the Holy Spirit. A movement is an ecosystem that is empowered and blessed by God’s Spirit.”



*Figure 3:4: Visualization of a gospel ecosystem for a city*¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁶ Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, p. 64.

¹⁶⁷ Which is largely identical to the third part of his earlier book *Center Church*, but enhanced with essays of practitioners and theologians like Alan Hirsch.

¹⁶⁸ In contrast to Hirsch, in Keller’s view this should always be balanced with sufficient institutional characteristics. Keller, *Serving a Movement*, p. 195.

¹⁶⁹ Keller, *Serving a Movement*, pp. 225-227, 235-237.

¹⁷⁰ Keller, *Serving a Movement*, p. 242.

Such a ‘gospel ecosystem’ contains a shared theological vision that is contextualized for the city, a number of church multiplication movements from different denominations and networks – which by planting new churches also help renewing existing churches – and a whole set of specialized ministries. When all individual components start to work together, a *tipping point* can be reached, where “the movement dynamics for change become unstoppable”. This may lead a next milestone, a *citywide tipping point* which may happen “when the number of gospel-shaped Christians in a city becomes so large that Christian influence on the civic and social life of the city – and on the very culture – is recognizable and acknowledged. In the case of New York City, Keller estimates this number to be around 5 to 10 percent of people that are active in public life, enabling everybody to know an orthodox Christian believer they respect. If that would happen “the strong attitudinal barriers that block many urban residents from the message of Christianity would come down. Tens of thousands of souls could be redeemed.”¹⁷¹

3.8. A ‘missional ecclesiological network-lens’

The contributions of the six conversation partners can now be used to sharpen the ‘network lens’ that was developed in the previous chapter, enabling the answering of the question:

What insights from missional ecclesiological literature can be used for evaluating ‘networks of new things’?

I answer this question sixfold, bringing each missional ecclesiological voice in conversation with insights from the previous chapter.

Stefan Paas

The motivation for church planting impacts the structure and dynamics of ‘network of new things’:

- In the case of **planting better churches** the network will likely be kept ‘pure’ given the narrowly defined social identity of such a church, resulting in minimal interactions with churches that have the ‘wrong’ beliefs or practices. This will likely mean that (long distance) connections within the own network are relatively strong, or that an individual ‘new thing’ remains largely isolated.
- In the case of **planting more churches** the focus will be rapid multiplication, combined with a pragmatic mindset that is open to ‘whatever works’. If the network grows large, hubs will emerge automatically, or are established intentionally through strategic planning. Connection with other churches is likely, as long as they contribute to the same (growth) mission.
- In the case of **planting new churches** the dynamics of the network will depend on many factors. Given the inherent tension in ‘innovating on behalf of the whole church’, connection will depend on the behaviour of both the innovators *and* the larger church. Innovators may have the tendency to primarily connect with their context (local networks) or other innovators (thanks to homophily); the inherited church may also find it not easy to connect with innovators (thanks to homophily). Therefore a mediator – acting as hub in the network – will be crucial in holding this setup together. Otherwise the network will fragment, or a network of innovators may separate from the larger church.

¹⁷¹ Keller, *Serving a Movement*, pp. 245-246.

Michael Moynagh

- **New ecclesial communities** are a specific type of node, with their own characteristics (missional, contextual, formational, ecclesial) and formation process, which can be regarded as a **pull** process, where the activity of the Holy Spirit in the context determines where, when and how such community is emerging. This can be contrasted by a **push** process of attractional church planting.
- Emergence of a new ecclesial community should be a highly **relational process** rooted in the self-giving of God.
- **The innovation framework** provides a framework, rooted in complexity theory and laden with eschatology-driven pneumatology, that can be applied to any level of organisation (see § 1.4) including 'inter-local-church' level. In that sense it can be very helpful for evaluating the emergence of 'networks of new things' including any processes at a higher or lower level of organisation. The innovation process highlights the importance of good connectivity between people, so that stories and feedback may flow freely. Next to that, a good connection with the overarching story (tradition) is important.

Ric Thorpe

- **Resource churches** are a specific type of node intentionally designed and resourced for maximum fitness within a growing network (in that sense designed with the whole in mind), and therefore able to quickly act as a hub.
- Growth of the network is 'carefully engineered', including a **leadership pipeline**. The connections of a resource church not only result in the flow of information, stories and the like, but also flows of leaders and money through the network.
- **Connection to the church hierarchy** is a unique feature of resource churches. Thanks to the mutually interdependent relationships with bishops, resource churches are connectors between two very different networks (the 'network of new things' and the church hierarchy).
- A compelling **connection to church history (tradition)**, both the early church and the recent history of the Church of England, is helpful in embedding the 'discovery' of a 'new type of new thing' into the wider church (see also my last point regarding Moynagh, above).

Sam Wells

- **The 4C model** provides a specific node, or actually set of nodes, that form a local 'micro-network', being able to locally connect to very different networks.
- Soteriology matters: good news in Wells' theology is overcoming isolation by **sharing relational abundance**. This different soteriology results in a different analysis of the state of society and the church, providing a different motivation for expanding networks of new things (as addition to the motivations that Paas presents).
- Overcoming isolation and sharing abundance is an excellent **theological rationale for all social networks** regardless of the type, including 'networks of new things'.
- Building on the previous point: taking the systems theory view of death into account, the soteriological categories 'death' and 'isolation' may actually be quite close to each other. Put positively: increasing connectivity at any level adds **vitality to the church**.

Alan Hirsch

- Provides a theological rationale for the **church as movement** based on latent properties (movement DNA), away from anything institutional.
- The nodes for 'networks of new things' that he suggests can be best regarded as a '**house church**'. Anything that makes nodes more difficult to replicate makes them less 'fit'.
- Highlights the importance of **the structure of the network** to support the movement, by balancing between keeping cohesion, and preventing 'movement blockers'.
- Highlights the catalytic role of individuals – primarily '**apostles**' – in establishing and maintaining the networks and movement, potentially also within institutions. Such people will have a very central position in the network.

Tim Keller

- A theological rationale for the church as **collaborative movement**, highlighting the importance of inter-network connections. This can be done by creating a shared identity based on reaching a shared locality (city) with the gospel.
- The gospel ecosystem presented by Keller does not resemble natural ecosystems, but can be considered an **organizational network** with a diverse coalition working together to obtain a highly complex objective.
- Soteriology matters: **redeeming people is a strong driving force**, especially when combined with complexity thinking that makes the existence of a *city-wide tipping point* plausible – where thousands of people are redeemed and the city transformed.

Chapter 4: Three ‘networks of new things’

4.1. Introduction

With the network lens sharpened by missional ecclesiology ready it is now time to start looking at ‘networks of new things’. This chapter will cover the networks that are the focus of this research separately at first, and together in the last paragraph. The material in this chapter can be regarded a synthesis of the different investigations, that are part of the *Facet Methodology* (see §1.4) I have used; interviews with network participants, participatory observations of network activities, newsletters, websites and accounts on the history and underlying theology of the networks have each highlighted different elements of the networks, resulting in different ‘flashes of insight’. The synthesis of these insights has been structured as follows: for each network, a brief overview is followed by the network origins – as *path dependency* implies that anything happening before influences what emerges later¹⁷² – after which ‘snapshots’ of the network structure are given, followed by identity and dynamics within the network.

4.2. HTB network

Holy Trinity Brompton (HTB) is at the centre of many networks, and can be described as

one of the world’s leading hubs of Christian evangelism, church planting and spiritual renewal, famous as the birthplace of Alpha. [...] It stands at the centre of a nexus of significant transnational relationships and innovations that shape the expression of modern religious culture in multiple contexts and communities.¹⁷³

One of the networks that springs out of HTB is a network of church plants and revitalised churches, consisting of 173 churches, of which 9 overseas. The first church was planted in 1985 in London. Since then, more than 20 resource churches have been planted, and around 40% of the churches in the network are in estate neighbourhoods or areas of deprivation.¹⁷⁴ Around 33.000 people regularly attend one of the churches in the network, a significant amount for the Church of England.¹⁷⁵ The network is supported by Revitalise Trust, which is responsible for:

- Partnering with Dioceses in church planting (establishing a new church) and revitalisation (‘overhauling’ an existing church with new leadership and members)
- Leadership development: the Accelerator programme (church-planters), Peter stream (ordinands with underrepresented background) and the Caleb stream (ordination of experienced leaders)
- Social outreach network Love Your Neighbour.
- Network support, such as organising ‘church holiday’ Focus and the Leadership Conference.¹⁷⁶

Churches in the HTB network are recognizable by the informal charismatic-evangelical style of worship and use of Alpha. For many year Nicky Gumbel was the key figure as vicar of HTB and figurehead of Alpha. In 2022 Archie Coates took over the vicar role, with Nicky Gumbel focusing on supporting the global Alpha-network (which has reached an estimated 30 million people in more than 150 countries).¹⁷⁷

¹⁷² See §3.3 and Moynagh, *Church in Life*, p. 93.

¹⁷³ Atherstone, *Repackaging Christianity*, p. 1.

¹⁷⁴ *Revitalise* 7 (2023), https://issuu.com/crtrust/docs/rev_revitalise_magazine_23_aw, pp. 2, 8-9.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid. Weekly attendance in the Church of England, was around 650.000 in 2022. *Statistics for Mission 2022* <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2023-11/statisticsformission2022.pdf>, p. 18.

¹⁷⁶ ‘Discover our Mission’, <https://revitalisetrust.org/> (d.d. 14 August 2024).

¹⁷⁷ Atherstone, *Repackaging Christianity*, pp. 241-243. ‘Our Story’ <https://htb.org/story> (d.d. 15 Augustus 2024).



Figure 4:1: The 6:30 service at HTB Onslow Square

Origins

In the 1970's HTB was a traditionalist 'society' church in decline, with a fringe group actively engaged in spiritual renewal. After a merger with St Paul's, Onslow Square, the culture began to shift. In the early 1980's the conviction grew that despite secularization, "God wants his family to grow".¹⁷⁸ This growth mindset was catalysed by Californian evangelist and church planter John Wimber, who had a profound impact on HTB: during visits he demonstrated *power evangelism* by invoking the Holy Spirit and actively healing attendees. His style was relaxed and informal, and his close connection to Peter Wagner – a strong advocate of Church Growth theory – materialised in his establishment of the network of Vineyard churches. This all deeply influenced leaders like Nicky Gumbel and (long-term vicar) Sandy Millar, who was impressed by Wimber's

emphasis on intimacy with God and with fellow believers; informal worship; practical demonstrations of 'signs and wonders'; generosity in resourcing other churches; ecumenical instinct; simplicity and lack of pretentiousness, without 'hype' or emotional pressure; and inclusion of every Christian in evangelism and prayer ministry without reliance on 'experts'. Vineyard provided an attractive and highly portable model of renewal that could be transplanted into a church of England context and showed HTB a path to follow.¹⁷⁹

The Vineyard DNA became engrained in HTB's culture; from 1985 onwards around 15 churches were planted in London, before in 2009 the first church was planted outside the capital. The team planting at St Peter's Brighton was led by HTB associate vicar Archie Coates, accompanied by 30 people moving house from London to Brighton, and a similar amount already living in Brighton. According to Director of Planting Mark Elsdon-Dew¹⁸⁰ this was a new style of planting:

We didn't know that it would work. And in fact, it probably wouldn't have worked if we'd done it in 1985, because it was too early. But come 2009: HTB had been a large church now for 20 years, and so there were people all over the country who had been at HTB in London. And so suddenly we had access to people who would naturally join the plant.

¹⁷⁸ Atherstone, *Repackaging Christianity*, pp. 2-3, 19-21, 29.

¹⁷⁹ Atherstone, *Repackaging Christianity*, p. 38

¹⁸⁰ Interview with Mark Elsdon-Dew, 19 June 2024.

From the beginning St Peters was planted with the intention to multiply, and as such became the inspiration for the *resource church* concept (see §3.4). Ric Thorpe recalls how this ‘invention’ started:

We were standing around a flip chart with a rough drawing of England covered in crosses marking churches in various locations, with lines and arrows going from them to other places nearby, [...] dreaming dreams about how the Church of England could play its part in seeing the lives of people in our cities and towns transformed by the radical love of Jesus Christ, to reverse the church’s decline and move into significant growth. We dreamed of churches multiplying, beginning in cities and planting and revitalizing churches all across their regions, igniting a fire of renewal across the nation.¹⁸¹

Soon afterwards, this vision started to materialise, often planting in church buildings that were threatened to be closed, or had been closed for many years.

Structure

As more churches were planted, a network emerged with connections between planted and sending churches. After London, it first grew in the South of England (the ‘low hanging fruit’) and later in the North as well, resulting in a network spreading out over England and Wales, with HTB London as the absolutely central hub, and resource churches acting as local hubs. The figures below show a (relatively complete) visualization of the network.

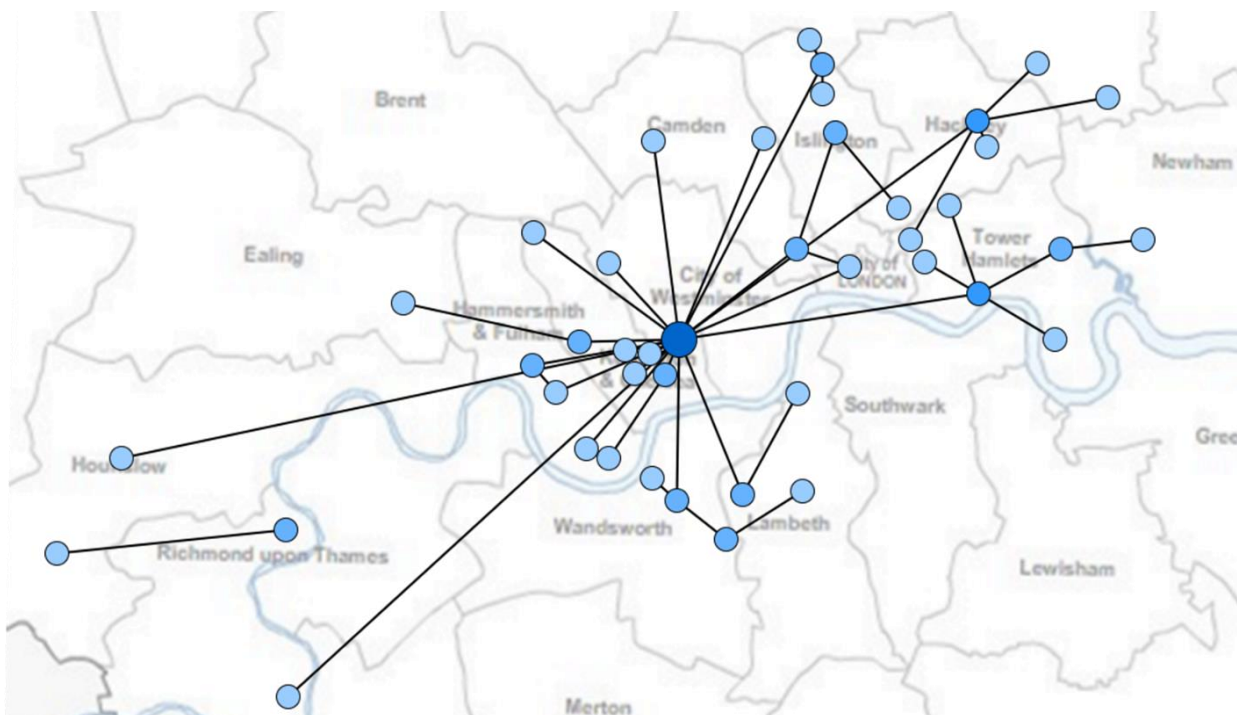


Figure 4.2: The HTB network in the London area¹⁸²

¹⁸¹ Ric Thorpe, *Resource Churches*, p. 1.

¹⁸² All network visualizations are drawn by me, based on publicly available information, and using draw.io. Sources: ‘HTB network’, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HTB_network, ‘Our Family’, <https://saint.church/our-family/>, ‘Sundays at HTB’ <https://htb.org/sundays> (d.d. 12 August 2024).

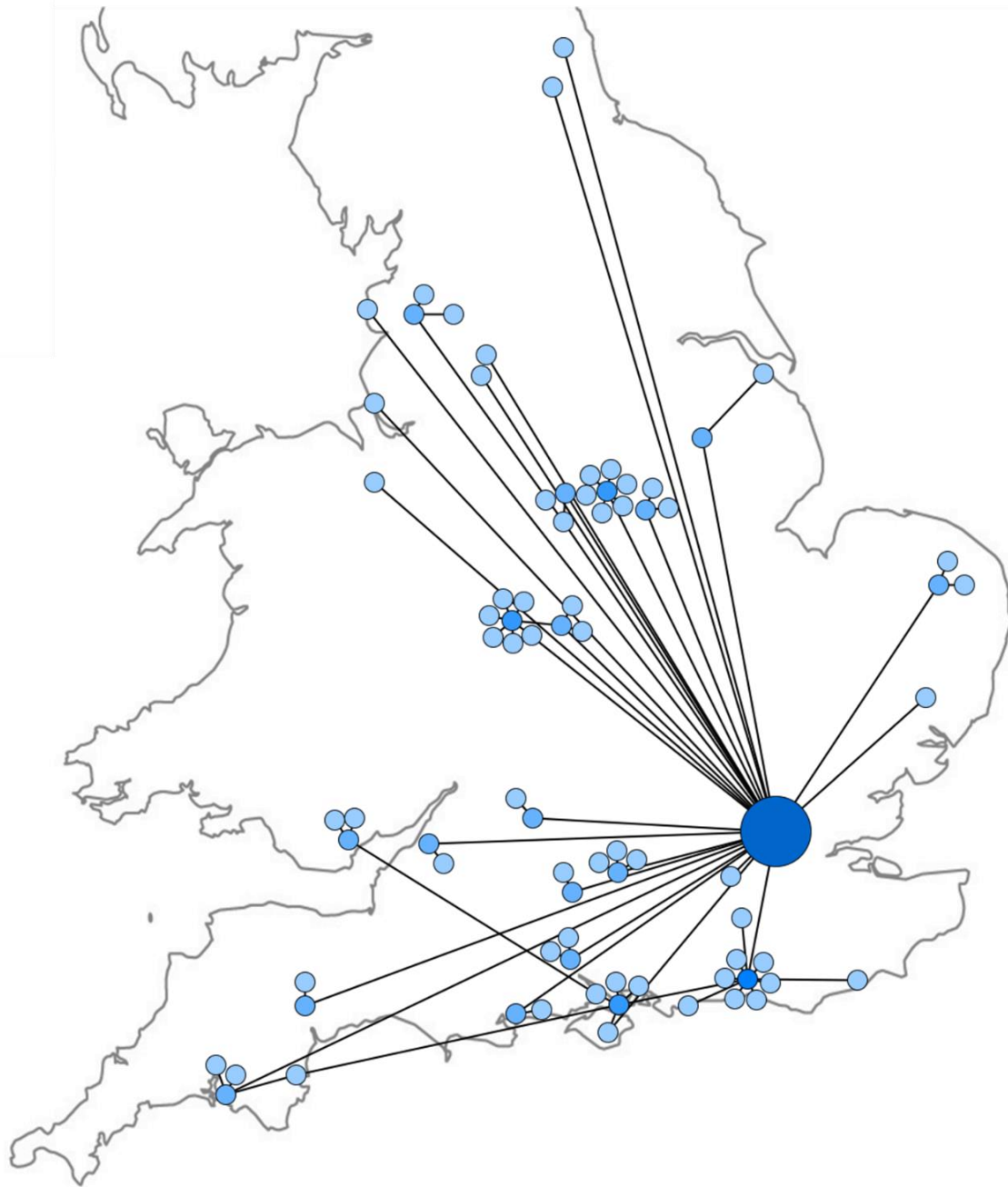


Figure 4.3: The HTB network on a UK level¹⁸³

¹⁸³ All London churches combined into one node. Sources: 'HTB network' https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HTB_network, *Revitalise* 7 (2023), *Revitalise* 6 (2022) https://issuu.com/crtrust/docs/crt_revitalise_magazine_2022_digital_aw, *Revitalise* 5 (2021) https://issuu.com/crtrust/docs/crt_revitalise_magazine_2021_digital_aw 'Our Story' <https://www.stmarkscoventry.org/our-story>, 'Gas Street Church Sundays' <https://gasstreet.church/sundays>, 'Our Story', <https://stwderby.org/story>, 'Citizen' <https://www.citizenchurch.org.uk/>, 'What is the family of churches' <https://stpetersbrighton.org/family-of-churches/>, 'St Simons' <https://stmplymouth.org.uk/st-simons>, 'St Andrew's Exwick' <https://stmattsexeter.org/standrews>, 'Our story' <https://www.welcometostlukes.org/about> 'We are woven' <https://wearewoven.church/>, 'You belong here' <https://www.basingstoke.church/>, 'Story so far' <https://gasstreet.church/storysofar> (d.d. 12 August 2024).

As the HTB network can be primarily regarded relational – all worshipping communities are formally linked to their local parish, deanery and diocese – the above connections are based on the assumption that relatively strong relationships exist between a planted church and its ‘parent’. Such relationships may erode over time, impacted by the distance of a connection. Local church plants are often closely connected to the sending church, forming a local network (for instance the Werb’s network around St Werburgh’s in Derby¹⁸⁴). Sometimes the integration is even stronger, and different locations are considered to be one congregation, such as HTB in London that presents itself as “Ten services, Six sites, One church”.¹⁸⁵

These visualizations of the networks don’t do justice to all the different connections that exist between individuals within the HTB network. In some cases these connections are facilitated through specific events, or courses for team members that share a certain role. Toby Flint, Senior Leader at St Nicholas Bristol shares his experience regarding such gatherings:

I've found that really invaluable, particularly the peer-to-peer support. But there's also a lot of practical help in terms of the CRT network and particularly on the operational side, buildings, HR, Finance... there's a lot of training that we've been able to access. For the team, and I think being part of a crew, across this network having - I suppose - the similar challenges of kids work, there's a network for kids workers, there's a network for youth workers... That's been really helpful.¹⁸⁶

Another way of looking at the networks, is a regarding them a ‘family tree’. This fits well with the family language that is often used within the HTB network, referring to church plants in terms of ‘generation’. In recent years many second and third generation plants have emerged, which don’t have a direct connection with HTB in London. However, they are connected to the resource churches, Revitalise Trust and through Focus, which serves as the main gathering point for the network.¹⁸⁷

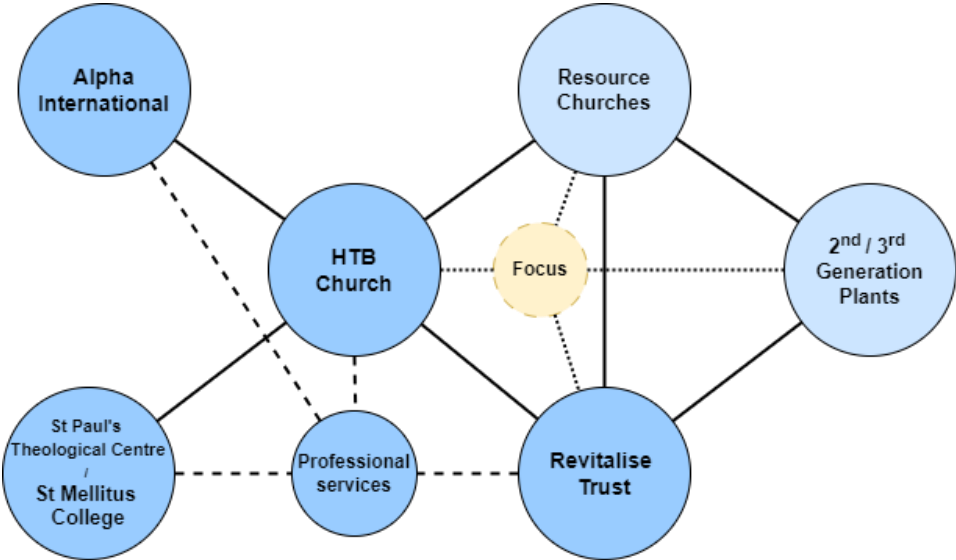


Figure 4.4: The HTB network, with the HTB group in darker blue

The HTB network can also be visualized in a different way (see figure 4.4), highlighting the importance of Focus as connection point, and showing the centrality of the Revitalise Trust in connecting the

¹⁸⁴ ‘Our Network’ <https://www.stederby.org/our-network> (d.d. 15 August 2024).
¹⁸⁵ ‘We are London. We are HTB’, <https://htb.org/> (d.d. 17 August 2024).
¹⁸⁶ Interview with Toby Flint, 11 July 2024.
¹⁸⁷ For an impression: ‘Focus’ <https://htb.org/focus> (d.d. 17 August 2024).

different churches of the network. It also highlights how a diverse set of networks are joint together through four charitable organizations that form the HTB Group:

- **Revitalise Trust**, next to the HTB Network it coordinates social action network *Love Your Neighbour*, comprising of 1500 churches and other partners, centred around 118 hubs “to inspire a fresh movement of practical love for our neighbour”.¹⁸⁸
- **Alpha International** serves and connects a global network of 83 national Alpha offices¹⁸⁹
- **St Paul’s Theological Centre (SPTC)** and the closely connected **St Mellitus College** are at the centre of a ‘theological network’, with the latter being the largest ordination training college in the UK¹⁹⁰ and having a long-running theological podcast GodPod¹⁹¹
- The centrality of the **HTB church** in the HTB Group is apparent, as the CEO’s of Revitalise Trust, Love Your Neighbour and Alpha International, and the Principal of SPTC / Dean of St Mellitus College, are (or were) all curates at HTB.¹⁹²

As there is a separate **Professional Services** organisation for all four charities, the Alpha Group can be regarded a shared services network. However, considering it an organizational network (see §2.5) may be more appropriate, given the diversity of organizations that together try to contribute to the complex vision of “the evangelisation of the nations, the revitalisation of the church and the transformation of society”.¹⁹³

Identity and dynamics

The HTB identity can be expressed by its values – audacity, tenacity, unity, generosity and humility – and style of worship, which are (still) consistent with John Wimber’s influence in the 1980s. It seems to permeate the whole network even towards the edges, such as at St Francis, Mackworth estate in Derby. Church leader Andy Bond¹⁹⁴ says: “We have the HTB DNA: we’re prayerful, we’re missional, we’re expectant, we seek to be positive, we seek to be honouring, we have a can-do attitude.” This HTB identity is combined with a local flavour: “We also are aware that Mackworth is local and it’s working class and it’s not a big book culture. There’s all sorts of things locally, which mean we have to be much more contextual and local.”

For resource churches, the HTB identity is even stronger, benefiting them in attracting newcomers. Toby Flint: “I think inevitably people move between cities and they often find a sort of similarity of church and easy connection when they arrive, to join and have those connections.” Given the cultural similarities and similar dynamics, it is not surprising a strong connection exists between leaders of resource churches within the network.

¹⁸⁸ ‘Love Your Neighbour’, <https://www.loveyourneighbour.uk/alliance> (d.d. 15 August 2024).

¹⁸⁹ ‘National Offices’, <https://alpha.org/national-offices/> (d.d. 15 August 2024).

¹⁹⁰ Mark J. Cartledge, Sarah Dunlop, Heather Buckingham and Sophie Bremner, *Megachurches and Social Engagement: Public Theology in Practice* (Leiden, Brill: 2019), p. 129

¹⁹¹ ‘GodPod’, <https://sptc.htb.org/godpod> (d.d. 15 August 2024).

¹⁹² Sarah Jackson (CEO Revitalise Trust), Tom Jackson (CEO Love Your Neighbour), Russel Winfield (Principal of SPTC and Dean of St Mellitus College). ‘Leadership’, <https://htb.org/leadership> (d.d. 15 August 2024). Earlier Nick Perryman (CEO Alpha International) was also mentioned as curate at the HTB website. He has been ordained as priest at HTB in 2024. <https://www.london.anglican.org/articles/ordinations-2024/> (d.d. 15 August 2024).

¹⁹³ This vision is shared widely within the HTB network (inter)nationally. See for example: ‘Revitalise Trust’ <https://revitalisetrust.org/>; ‘Our Vision & Values’, <https://careers.htbgroup.org/>; ‘Our Story’ <https://htb.org/story>; ‘About us’ <https://www.stnicholasbristol.org/about>; ‘Onze visie’ <https://alphanederland.org/organisatie/> (d.d. 15 August 2024).

¹⁹⁴ Interview with Andy Bond, 4 July 2024.

Starting a resource church – often with strong financial support by the Church of England – is an exciting undertaking for those involved. Bond, on his previous involvement in planting a resource church:

That whole first three years of planting St Werburgh's in the city centre was an absolute privilege. Many churches I've been part of would take six months to a year to change a notice board, and we saw a derelict building with no toilets, no kitchen, no heating, no carpet, no rooms apart from the main room, you know... go from that to a usable building with hundreds of people in. And that rate of transformation, growth was incredible, totally incredible! And I think one of the things HTB bring, is a real emphasis on prayer, on God's bigness and ableness. There's this kind of can-do... not: we're gonna tense our muscles, and we're gonna make it happen... but actually: if we're working in line with God, if we allow the Spirit to move, if we step out in faith, we're gonna see God do some stuff!

As many to-be planters study together at St Mellitus College, work as curate at a resource church, and are intensively trained and supported by the Revitalise Trust around the planting process, strong connections are forged between people in the network. These are so strong, that Mark Elsdon-Dew likens the HTB network to a family. Things like loyalty to their Bishop, unity with other Christians, the use of Alpha and commitment to the person and work of the Holy Spirit are all important for the HTB identity, but “at the end of the day, we love Jesus and we're just a family.”

In that light the role of Revitalise Trust is giving “a bit of family support”, such as training or retreats for church leaders, which is highly appreciated. Bond: “To be able to be in the room with other people in similar circumstances, hearing their stories, praying for one another, prophesying over one another [...] sitting down over dinner, talking about things [...] that was incredibly special for us.” Another key connection point is Focus, in Elsdon-Dew's words “a big family event” with around 8000 people camping together. “What Archie says: ‘family on a mission’.” For this mission, reproduction is regarded essential. Elsdon-Dew always tells church planters:

Make sure you plant! Make sure you plant another centre. At the centre of the HTB kind of DNA is generosity. You've got to give away your best, and give away your money, and give it all away, because if you are ever in danger of holding things to yourself, then it gets very difficult with the Lord. Because the Lord makes us to give.

Although this all may suggest that HTB acts as a movement, Elsdon-Dew is very determined to avoid that word, as “a network is just a loose federation and a movement suggests that we're all standing together. And you know, if you take on one of us, you're taking on all of us kind of thing, and that is a threat to the bishops. And so the bishops would be very nervous about a threat of that kind, and so we emphasise that that is not what we are.”

Being a family also means it's not so easy to join; churches from outside cannot join the network, except when an ‘HTB bred leader’ takes over. Most HTB leaders emerge from the internal ‘leadership pipeline’, although sometimes leaders from outside get ‘adopted’. Through such leaders – like Bond, who had a pioneering ministry training – the network is getting more diverse, which is welcome given the “hope to see 50% of the Network planted and revitalised in estate neighbourhoods and areas of deprivation” by 2030. To enable this diversification, a special “Estates and Neighbourhood Accelerate training platform” was created. These more contextual plants often incorporate activities that can be recognized as Fresh Expressions, such as Messy Church, Café Church or recently emerged Bubble Church.¹⁹⁵

This higher diversity is also apparent at the centre of the network: Services at HTB in London are led by an ethnically diverse group of people – many of them alumni of the Peter Stream – which reflects

¹⁹⁵ *Revitalise 7*, pp. 14-17, 28-29, 52.

the diverse group of attendees during the services. This, together with the ambition to expand the network towards the margins of society, represents a major change compared to the ‘society’ church that HTB was until quite recently.¹⁹⁶ Such a rapidly growing and diversifying network inevitably provides its challenges. Toby Flint reflects:

My observation is as things have grown, it's obviously exciting, but it's also harder to communicate and have that sense that we're all part of the same thing. You know, size means you don't feel so much connection. Even with our church plants, they're one stage removed from being part of HTB. There are gathering points throughout the year, Focus and that sort of thing. But obviously, you know it's a harder, it's a challenge to hold people in - I suppose - and make people feel that they're connected relationally as much as anything.

The HTB network continues to expand, moving ‘deep’ – into the margins of society – and ‘wide’ – multiplying numerically in all dimensions, from the number of church plants and revitalisations to the size and variety its leadership pipelines.¹⁹⁷ Holding such a network all together, keeping the ‘family identity’ is a challenge. It may be a challenge out of luxury – a highly successful network – but a challenge it remains.

4.3. HeartEdge network

St Martin-in-the-Fields – located at the edge of Trafalgar Square, London – is the absolute centre of the HeartEdge network. St Martins vicar and HeartEdge founder Sam Wells describes it as

an international ecumenical movement for church renewal around the 4Cs, currently focusing mostly around how churches can increase their income and have positive effects on their cultural, compassion and congregational programmes, through rethinking how they do commerce and how they generate funds for their ministry.¹⁹⁸



Figure 4.5: *Moonlight Sonata by Candlelight, St Martin-in-the-Fields*

¹⁹⁶ “Despite its radically changed theological ethos, HTB remained as much a ‘society’ church in the 1990s and early 2000s as it had been in the 1960s”. Atherstone, *Repackaging Christianity*, p. 117.

¹⁹⁷ *Revitalise* 7, pp. 3, 52.

¹⁹⁸ Interview with Sam Wells, 10 June 2024.

Origins

Located in a landmark historical building from 1726, St Martin-in-the-Fields has been well known in the UK and abroad for many years. The first BBC religious broadcast was hosted by St Martin's in 1924, many have followed. "The creation of the Academy at St Martin in the Fields in 1958 made St Martin's as famous for its music as for its social outreach, and the inception of a commercial enterprise in 1987 enabled financial sustainability. A huge makeover, completed in 2008, transformed and upgraded the site."¹⁹⁹

When Wells joined St Martin's in 2012, he made a profound impact by presenting what was already going in a compelling framework – the 4Cs – accompanied by a distinctive theological narrative based on sharing God's abundance (see §3.4). This abundance is to be considered mainly relational, in line with Wells' well-known term *being with*.²⁰⁰ When many people were visiting St Martin's to learn from the practices for their own context, HeartEdge was founded in 2017 "to turn the blessings of St Martin's into blessings for church and society more broadly"²⁰¹ Its name derived from St Martin's vision statement 'At the heart. On the edge.', Thanks to a funding boost in 2018 it was able to expand its work, including multiple (inter)national events. During the pandemic it quickly moved online, with support groups, online learning conferences and a wealth of resources to support online services. After the pandemic a week long face to face conference was held in Leeds, with around 300 attendees, partially international.



Figure 4.6: Café in the Crypt at St Martin's, with a subtle reference to Wells' theology

Structure

As initially the idea was to connect congregations to HeartEdge, several hub churches were established that already embodied the 4C practices, to help other churches adopt HeartEdge practices as well. After a few years this structure was abandoned, because it didn't yield the desired results.

¹⁹⁹ Wells, *A Future that's Bigger than the Past*, p. 17.

²⁰⁰ Wells, *A Nazareth Manifesto*, pp. 11-18.

²⁰¹ Wells, *A Future that's Bigger than the Past*, p. 22.

After trying another network configuration, HeartEdge is currently in a transitional phase, as an anticipated “very significant and long running partnership with the Church of England’s strategic Mission and Ministry Investment Board” is not happening. Three staff members left HeartEdge this year, a more limited programme is running now until another funding source is found.

Wells: “I think we did have affiliation by churches at the beginning, but now we have sort of affiliation by mailing list. We probably have about 5000 people on our mailing list.” Next to the mailing list, one-on-one support is still happening. For instance: Wells regularly connects people to Nigel Wright, formerly vicar of HeartEdge hub St Edmunds in Leeds, who can provide them with advice or guidance.²⁰² It is probably fair to represent HeartEdge in its current setup as a star network (see figure 4.7) with St Martin’s in the middle, primarily represented by Wells.

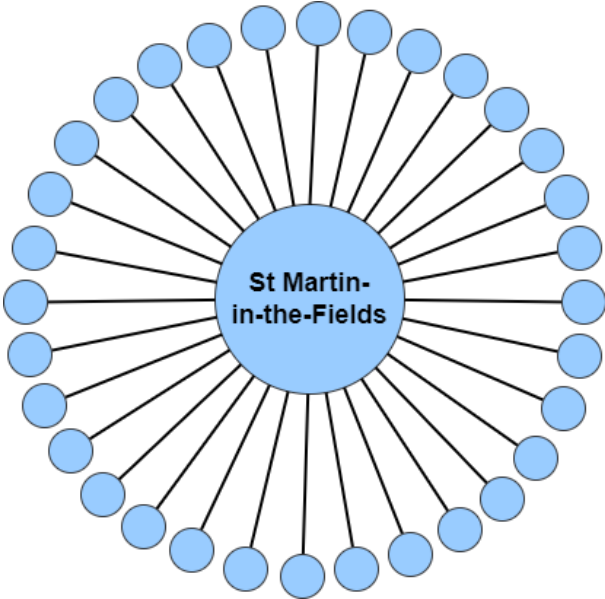


Figure 4.7: The HeartEdge network

Wright recognizes this: “The one concern around HeartEdge is that it really is Sam.” That is about to change as a job posting was opened for an Operations and Delivery Manager,²⁰³ likely responsible for the delivery of “immersive training sessions, thought-provoking workshops, cutting-edge consultancy services, and dynamic peer support networks called the Practitioners Community.”²⁰⁴

Another way of looking at the network structure is through all organisations that are connected to St Martin’s. Although undoubtedly not exhaustive, those shown in figure 4.8 are most relevant for this research. In line with the 4C model there is a company (Commerce), a charity (Compassion), a culture organization and a congregation, together supported by a trust. The Nazareth Community is a monastic community that regularly meets at St Martin’s and is led by St Martin’s clergyman Richard Carter.

²⁰² Interview with Nigel Wright, 2 July 2024.
²⁰³ ‘Job Description, Operations and Delivery Manager, HeartEdge’ <https://www.stmartin-in-the-fields.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/he-ops-manager-jd.pdf> (d.d. 17 August 2024).
²⁰⁴ HeartEdge’ <https://www.heartedge.org/> (d.d. 17 August 2024).

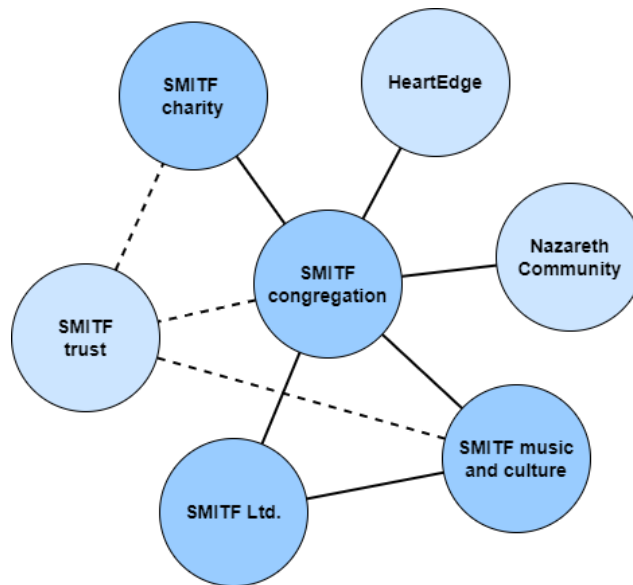


Figure 4.8: Network around St Martin-in-the-Fields, 4Cs coloured darker²⁰⁵

Identity and dynamics

According to Wells, one of the reasons for starting HeartEdge was “trying to put the Broad Church on the front foot”,²⁰⁶ as virtually all other missional or social action initiatives were Evangelical. Being Broad church continued to be part of the HeartEdge identity; Wright notes:

Sam’s always very keen to make sure the church that was trying to be in sympathy with HeartEdge had its own unique flavours. It had its own unique way of doing things. But whatever else happened, it needed to be Broad Church, it needed to be accepting across a broad range.

Apart from that, HeartEdge identity is quite undefined. Sian Yates, former Priest at Penlee Cluster says: “I think a HeartEdge church will look different in every place. If they look the same, something would be wrong.”²⁰⁷ There is one element, however, that does provide a shared identity: Sam Wells and his writings. Wright says:

Being understood theologically was incredibly important because up until being introduced to Sam and his theology, I wondered if I was just trying to do something that was impossible. [...] So to meet Sam and him having worked the theology out and him living it out at St Martin-in-the-Fields, which was struggling until he got there. That was a good moment, a reassuring moment. [...] And actually to be part of something that was preaching abundance and John 10, it was just so refreshing!

Apart from theological reflection HeartEdge can be regarded action-oriented. Wells: “We’re very much a doing organisation.” People may join if they are inspired by the ideas and want to start acting on them. Often it is other way around: people are already active practitioners, but now with the benefit of connecting with others. The 4Cs are central, as Wells explains: “I always say: ‘if you if you’ve got 2 1/2 of those, then we’re in a conversation.’”

²⁰⁵ Sources: ‘Congregational Life’ <https://www.stmartin-in-the-fields.org/life-st-martins/>, ‘SMITF Ltd’ <https://www.linkedin.com/company/st-martin-in-the-fields-london/about/>, <https://www.stmartin-in-the-fields.org/support-us/st-martin-in-the-fields-trust/>, ‘Meet the music team’, <https://www.stmartin-in-the-fields.org/music-programme/music-team/>, ‘SMITF Charity’, <https://www.smitfc.org/> ‘SMITF Trust’ <https://www.stmartin-in-the-fields.org/support-us/st-martin-in-the-fields-trust/>, ‘The Nazareth Community’ <https://www.nazareth.community/> (d.d. 13 August 2024).

²⁰⁶ ‘Broad Church’ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Broad-Church> (d.d. 17 August 2024).

²⁰⁷ Interview Andrew and Sian Yates, 3 July 2024.

Once being part of network, a lot of resources are available to support 4C practice. Next to that there are meeting with other practitioners, where people are “sharing ideas, pushing one another to take a risk, and reflect on it together.” In this way, new initiatives like the *Being With Course* have emerged. Perhaps even more important are the friendships, the connection with likeminded people. When asked to compare an (online) HeartEdge group with a local deanery chapter meeting, Wright says:

Very different dynamic! Because within the chapters you'd have all different types of churches, people from different churchmanships, there's always tensions. Whereas gathering online with the support groups you were all singing from the same hymn sheet, to quotes an English colloquialism. You were all on the same page, more or less in terms of theology and background, and what you're trying to achieve. So even though someone was in Texas and someone was in Amsterdam and someone was in Africa, you were on the same page.

4.4. Fresh Expressions network

Fresh Expressions (FX) is “a grassroots movement of people who can’t stop thinking about who isn’t in church and who want to do something about it”. It consists of fifteen different hubs connecting networks of practitioners, who are described as

ordinary individuals who have been starting new Christian communities in the nooks and crannies of people’s everyday lives. From new housing to rural, urban to suburban, messy church [...] to forests, coffee shops, beaches, pubs, barns, online and even church buildings!²⁰⁸

It partners with denominations (Baptists Together, The Church of England, The Church of Scotland, The Methodist Church, The Salvation Army, The United Reformed Church), parachurch organisations such as 24-7 Prayer, Church Army and CMS, and international partners including the Protestant Church in the Netherlands.²⁰⁹

The FX charity has central role in the network, consisting of a leadership community, board and operations team, providing resources, such as training, books, a newsletter reaching approximately 9000 people, and a website with around 137.000 visitors.²¹⁰

Origins

The FX movement started with the 2004 *Mission-shaped Church* report, with as subtitle “church planting and fresh expressions of church in a changing context”,²¹¹ and provided reflection on practices that have emerged at the fringes of church, that were at a certain moment ‘discovered’ by a bishop.²¹² MSC brought FX to full prominence, and fuelled growth of the movement. It provided a rationale for the existence of FX (the network society), theological reflection on its implications, and above all many examples. No clear distinction between church planting and FX was given, there seemed to be some overlap.²¹³ Soon after, a definition was developed by the FX team, accompanied by a process for FX formation (the serving-first journey) that clearly distinguishes it from church planting (see §3.3).

²⁰⁸ ‘Fresh Expressions’, <https://ccx.org.uk/together/fresh-expressions/> (d.d. 13 August 2024).

²⁰⁹ ‘Partners’, <https://freshexpressions.org.uk/get-connected/partners/> (d.d. 13 August 2024). See also: *FX Annual Report 2022-2023*, <https://freshexpressions.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/FX-Annual-Report-2023E.pdf>, p. 15

²¹⁰ *FX Annual Report 2022-2023*, p. 11.

²¹¹ *Mission-shaped Church*, p. 3.

²¹² Moynagh, *Church in Life*, p. 22.

²¹³ *Mission-shaped Church*, p. 21.

Structure

Initially FX was closely connected to the founding denomination including the Church of England, who provided funding and promotion, with diocesan FX advisors and central FX staff. The past years the FX movement became – partially voluntarily, partially not – more independent. Around 2019 the organization was restructured: “initiatives are merely managed, but movements are meant to be set free” so FX changed from “an organisation [to] a network of many networks. In place of an appointed leader, a community of movement leaders partnering, learning, and supporting each other. Resourcing each other in a variety of creative ways.”²¹⁴

The leadership is in the hands of a community made up of well-connected people from the broader network and supported by an operations team (overseen by a board), who consider their role to be:

- Prophetic listening to the voice of the Spirit in the movement
- Advocating for contextual mission and FX practitioners
- Connecting individuals and networks enabling collaboration
- Affirming and championing these individuals and networks²¹⁵

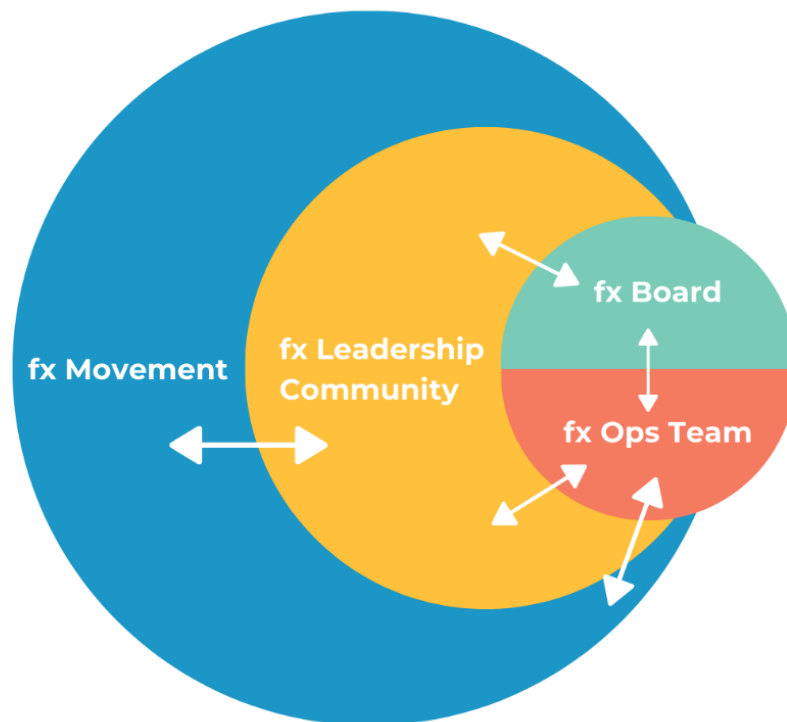


Figure 4.9: FX organisational structure²¹⁶

Within the movement, there are currently fifteen hubs, each connecting a different network, resulting in a ‘network of networks’.

²¹⁴ Video ‘FX is changing’ <https://freshexpressions.org.uk/what-is-FX/FX-charity-structure/FX-leadership-community/> (d.d. 13 August 2024).

²¹⁵ FX Annual Report 2022-2023, <https://freshexpressions.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/FX-Annual-Report-2023E.pdf>, p. 5.

²¹⁶ ‘Organisation and Structure’, <https://freshexpressions.org.uk/what-is-FX/FX-charity-structure/FX-purpose-and-structure/> (d.d. 29 July 2024).

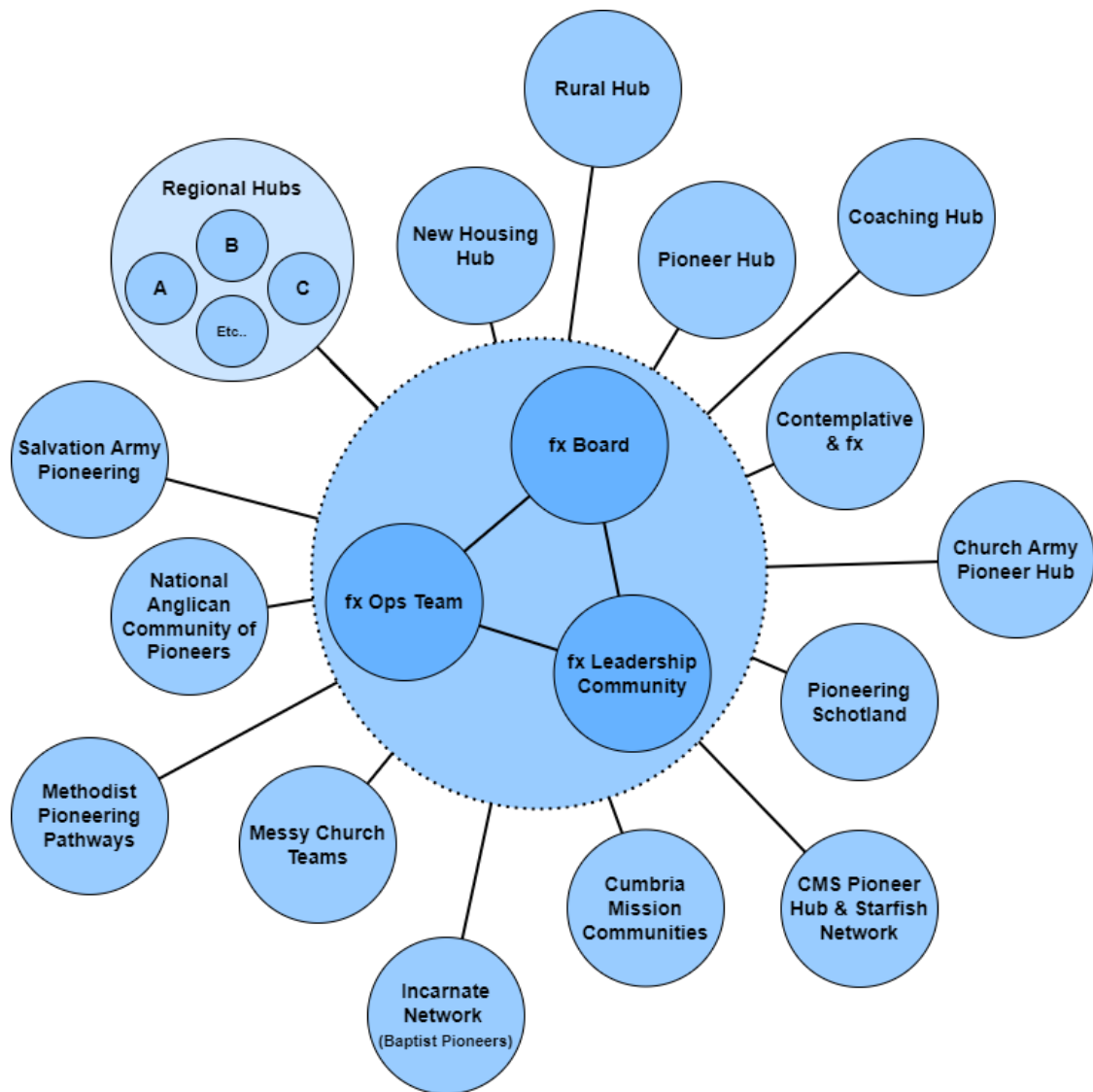


Figure 4.10 The FX network of networks²¹⁷

In reality there are many more interconnections between the networks than this visualization suggests. However, it shows the relative independence of the different networks, held together by a more dense leadership and support network.

Identity and dynamics

Although the above structure suggests an extensive network connecting many FXs, many FX from the Church of England are actually not connected to this network. None of people I interviewed were aware that the FX network (still) exists. The Messy Church team members of Christ Church Bexleyheath use the Messy Church books as source for inspiration, and regularly connect with one other Messy Church team, but are not connected any further.²¹⁸

²¹⁷ 'Hubs' <https://freshexpressions.org.uk/get-connected/hubs/>, 'Organisation & Structure' <https://freshexpressions.org.uk/what-is-FX/FX-charity-structure/FX-purpose-and-structure/> (d.d. 13 August 2024).

²¹⁸ Interview with Vicky Cox and Lydia Fuller, 26 May 2024.



Figure 4.11: Messy Church at Christ Church Bexleyheath

Linda Maslen, Church Leader of Fountains Church Bradford,²¹⁹ who was recently on the *Mission-shaped Podcast* (a FX resource) for her involvement in Wrestling Church²²⁰ was not aware of any FX network existing, although she has been heavily involved in the FX movement before.²²¹ The most recent FX referral on the Church of England website is a programme called Greenhouse, which was not updated for at least 2 years.

It may be telling that Tim Lea, the FX operations team member responsible for networking, is a Methodist. He observes a growing distance between the Church of England and the FX Network, due to an increased focus on church planting within the Church of England: “We would never talk about FX as church planting. Because actually that's got a history which predates the Mission-shaped Church report, with a language all of its own.”²²² The same is the case for new worshipping communities “which clearly isn't the language of FX, but it's more encompassing because actually, what they wanted to do was to include church plants, revitalization projects, HTB style stuff. [...] So they wanted a broader definition and that's fine. The danger is that when you give that broader definition, you have to be crystal clear as to exactly what it is and how contextual is it. That tends to be the thing: that has got pushed to the side, would be my observation.”

The ‘purity’ of fresh expressions seems to be an important element for the FX movement, which is also evident in Michael Moynagh’s books.²²³ The ‘contextual-grassroots-spirit’ seems to permeate the FX movement, at least in the view of Lea. What unites FX practitioners is that “we're all crazy enough to think that it's not down to church, and it's down to the Holy Spirit who is at work in the world. [...] We all believe that God is already at work in somebody else.”

²¹⁹ Interview with Linda Maslen, 18 June 2024.

²²⁰ ‘S01 Ep6 Linda Maslen – Wrestling with the congregation, literally!’, <https://freshexpressions.org.uk/podcast/s01-ep6-linda-maslen-wrestling-and-other-things/>.

²²¹ She pioneered Saturday Gathering Halifax, see FX video ‘Saturday Gathering – Sep14’, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WGtNfsz_zQ (d.d. 28 July 2024) and Moynagh, *Church in Life*, pp. 3-4.

²²² Interview with Tim Lea, 20 June 2024.

²²³ He clearly considers the truly contextualized ‘new emerging communities’ to be superior. E.g. Moynagh, *Church in Life*, pp. 38-58.

Lea's networking-role is about bring people together around topics where the Spirit seems to be at work such as 'forest church' during COVID, and more recently pilgrimage:

So we've probably got about 70-80 people who were all exploring pilgrimage in all sorts of different ways in all sorts of contexts... [...] We often say we're a dating agency. We will end up putting people in contact with each other and they will swap ideas and they'll talk about what it is that they're doing, and how that might work its way out, and they learn from other people's experiences and share the things that have failed.

Such meetings often take place online. In the context of the Greenhouse programme (that still exists) Lea also provides coaching to pioneers. When asked what 'flows' through the network, Lea responds: "Stories have always flowed through our networks. Moaning flows through our networks... moaning and groaning and, yeah, wishing things were different, especially when it comes to institutions." This points to the most important part of the dynamics in the network: the relationships that grow between like-minded people: "You know, people from across the length and the breadth of the country who pioneers, who have done things differently, who sometimes have been heroes... They've become friends! That is amazing!"

4.5. Three networks at one glance

After treating the different networks separately, I will have a look at them together. That will (further) help answering the research question for this chapter:

How are the different 'networks of new things' within the Church of England structured, and what dynamics take place within these networks?

Size

Actually the sizes of the different networks are difficult to compare as no comparable numbers exist. How do 5000 (HeartEdge) or 9000 (FX) newsletter subscribers compare to 173 churches and 8000 Focus attendees (HTB)? The most fair comparison might be in terms of staff members dedicated to the network organization; in that case the HTB network (38 staff members at Revitalise Trust) is clearly larger than FX (4) and HeartEdge (1),²²⁴ although it may also just indicate that the HTB network is more resource-intensive.

Structure

In all cases the networks can be considered to consist mainly of interpersonal connections. The HTB network and HeartEdge both originated from a church in London, which has made them highly centralised at the beginning. This place of origin will likely remain the largest hub of the network, although the HTB network is steadily decentralising, with new local hubs and corresponding local networks emerging; HeartEdge stays highly centralised at the moment. The FX network started from a report capturing what was going at the margins of church; in that sense it likely always was quite decentralised, and the growing distance to the Church of England has made it even more so.

Flow

In all cases both practical information, inspiration and stories flow through the network. The relationships with (likeminded) peers are very frequently mentioned as the most valuable part of the network for its participants. It can be explained by homophily: being the leader of a 'new thing' is quite a unique position to be in, with very limited truly equal connections with others. Being listened

²²⁴ 'Team' <https://revitalisetrust.org/team>, 'fx Operations Team' <https://freshexpressions.org.uk/what-is-fx/fx-operations-team/> (d.d. 20 August 2024).

to, understood, prayed for, or simply having fun together is an incredibly valuable aspect of all ‘networks of new things’. In the case of the HTB network, people are also ‘flowing’ through the network, as both leaders and community members regularly move houses when planting or revitalising a church.

Identity

FX and HeartEdge explicitly present themselves as a movement, which makes them actually more open to newcomers (see §2.6 and §2.7). HTB presents itself as a family, which actually means the identity is more exclusive: leaders have to be ‘home grown’ or consciously ‘adopted’ to be part of the family. On the other hand, this type of identity suggests a less cause-driven network. That does not seem to be the case however, as the mission²²⁵ is consistently communicated throughout the network; ‘family on a mission’ describes the HTB network well.

The Holy Spirit

In all networks the Holy Spirit is regarded to be at work. FX and HeartEdge may be actually quite close to each other in terms of pneumatology, as both regard the Spirit to be at work in the world, and the task of the church is to go out there and join in. For HTB the Spirit is more closely connected to the church, as the emphasis on prayer (including invoking the Holy Spirit) and Spirit-related language suggests. To give a recent example:

Over the past few years, at Revitalise Trust we have sensed a stirring of the Holy Spirit, challenging us to be more intentional to reach those living on estate neighbourhoods and lower income areas marginalised by society.²²⁶

Quite remarkably, in the above example the Holy Spirit is sending the network to the same places where FX and HeartEdge are considering the Spirit to be at work. Perhaps it may be one and the same Spirit after all...

²²⁵ The Evangelisation of the Nations; The Revitalisation of the Church; The Transformation of Society. <https://revitalisetrust.org/> (d.d. 20 August 2024).

²²⁶ *Revitalise* 7, p. 52.

Chapter 5: Connecting networks

5.1. A bigger picture

After looking at the interactions *within* networks the focus now shifts to the interactions *between* them, both ‘networks of new things’ and others. My aim is to obtain more insight about networks but also about the Church of England as a whole. In other words: this chapter takes a wider vantage point (hopefully) resulting in a bigger picture. To get a feel for this bigger picture I bring to mind the conceptual model again, that was introduced in §1.4:

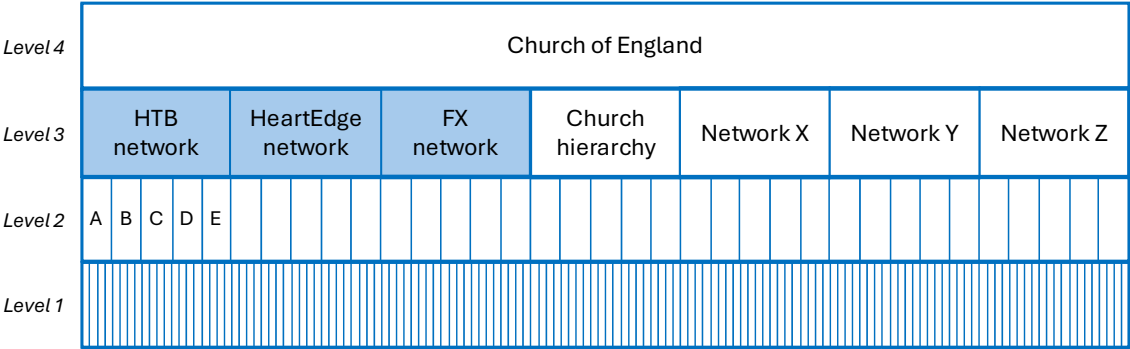


Figure 5.1: Conceptual model for this research

Before discussing network interactions, two relevant networks deserve some attention:

Church hierarchy

As I argued in §2.5 and §2.9, I consider the church hierarchy to be a network. With Lambeth Palace (Archbishop of Canterbury) and Bishopthorpe Palace (Archbishop of York) as the two largest hubs, and the cathedrals being the local hub for the 42 dioceses, the most important connectors in this network are the 108 bishops. They are undoubtedly well-connected to each other and (hopefully) with the different parishes and deaneries in their dioceses. Although the term ‘church hierarchy’ and ‘archbishop’ might suggest otherwise, there is no central authority within the Church of England; every diocese acts independently (with perhaps a few exceptions, such as doctrinal matters). The structure of the network can be conceived of as a ‘core/periphery’ type network (see §2.2) with the bishops as well-connected core. At this core several National Church Institutions are connected as well, such as The Archbishops’ Council and The Church Commissioners (including the Strategic Mission and Ministry Investment Board).²²⁷

New Wine

Most known for their annual summer festival, New Wine is “a Spirit-empowered movement bringing this nation back to Jesus – through the local Church – one renewed life at a time.” It was founded in 1989 by Anglican Bishop David Pytches and his wife Mary, who were close friends with John Wimber.²²⁸ New Wine consists of “a network of church leaders and practitioners who model [its] values and generously give away what they have received from God.”²²⁹ One such leader is Linda Maslen, Church Leader at Fountains Church Bradford, a resource church that was planted with the

²²⁷ ‘Leadership and governance’ <https://www.churchofengland.org/about/leadership-and-governance> (d.d. 18 August 2024).

²²⁸ ‘David Pytches’ <https://www.new-wine.org/stories/david-pytches/>; ‘In memory of David Pytches’ <https://www.vineyardchurches.org.uk/resources/in-memory-of-david-pytches/> (d.d. 18 August 2024).

²²⁹ ‘Who we are’ <https://www.new-wine.org/about/> (d.d. 18 August 2024).

New Wine network. Although theologically quite similar to HTB, the structure and dynamics of the network are very different: New Wine has a “much looser” approach than HTB, with less extensive preparation and support for church planters. When Maslen planted Fountains in 2018, she was part of a cohort of eight New Wine-planters that were trying to establish a diverse set of churches.

And so what the support really was, was that we would get together about twice a year, and share with each other what was happening, be prayed for, prophesy over each other, and support each other [...] and then we had a WhatsApp group which also meant that you could be talking to each other through the time, not just when you were together.²³⁰

Due to leadership changes and financial issues, New Wine’s focus on church planting was significantly reduced in the past years.

Apart from New Wine and the three networks that are the focus of this thesis, no other ‘networks of new things’ seem to exist at a national level within the Church of England. There are many more churches who plant other churches (or form new worshipping communities, if you like), but these networks stay relatively local.

5.2. Bishops and money

The influence of the church hierarchy on the ‘networks of new things’ is strong. In terms of the innovation process: it can give very strong amplifying or dampening feedback. The clear endorsement of Fresh Expressions (FX) by The Archbishop’s Council, and the Archbishop of Canterbury himself, had an enormously amplifying effect on the adoption of FXs and the formation of the FX network, with dedicated staff spread throughout the church promoting and facilitating the formation of new FXs. In recent years, the opposite seems to have happened: cutting down on network funding and laying off FX-staff undoubtedly sped up the ‘fading into the background’ of FX within the Church of England.

At an individual diocese level, the bishops (and their teams) decisions have determined whether churches could get planted, revitalised or become a HeartEdge-hub, and how curates were distributed over the churches. Especially establishing a resource church requires strong diocesan commitment, as it often requires significant investment in renovating a previously closed building and establishing a large staff team (typically consisting of a church leader, one or more curates, and staff roles such as operations, finance, worship, kids/youth, production and communication).²³¹ This requires the prioritisation of diocesan budget and curates towards resource churches, at the expense of regular parish churches. An important catalyst for establishing resource churches is funding provided by the Strategic Mission and Ministry Investment Board (previously known as Strategic Development Funding), which has a huge budget available for investment.²³²

A successful bid on such funding is often a make or break moment for establishing a resource church, thus impacting the regional expansion of the ‘network of new things’. It can even have an impact on the network as a whole, as the case of HeartEdge shows: not being able to secure strategic funding has made the whole network having to reconsider its organising principles.

²³⁰ Interview with Linda Maslen, 18 June 2024.

²³¹ For example, Fountains Church Bradford: ‘Our Team’ <https://fcb.church/our-team> and St Nicholas Bristol: ‘Who’s who’ <https://www.stnicholasbristol.org/whoswho> (d.d. 19 August 2024).

²³² In total £156m strategic funding for the Church Commissioners was reported for 2020-2022; for 2023-2025 this is increased to £226m. I could not retrieve how much of this is available for the Strategic Mission and Ministry Investment Board, but it will arguably be a significant part. ‘Funding for the Church’, https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2023-03/CofE_Factsheet4_FINAL.pdf (d.d. 19 August 2024).

HTB: Partnering with bishops

In the past 15 years or so, the HTB network has become increasingly dominant in planting and revitalising churches. One crucial reason for this are the strong connections with the church hierarchy. Some of the bishops are actually from the 'HTB-family: Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby was among the HTB leaders visiting John Wimber's Vineyard church (in 1983), 'Church Planting Bishop' Ric Thorpe led the very first HTB worship band (in 1990).²³³

What is undoubtedly essential for the strong connection between HTB and the church hierarchy is that HTB has consistently decided to work *within* the Church of England system, even if this requires patient negotiations and diplomacy. Whereas in the early 1990s New Wine founder David Pytches "launched the Federation of Independent Anglican Churches to link together church plants operating without episcopal permission [...] the HTB policy, by contrast, was to work as closely as possible with diocesan authorities." The benefit for HTB was that this enabled them to utilise a previously untapped resource: "numerous old church buildings that had fallen in a state of disrepair [...] or had shut altogether."²³⁴ HTB leader Nicky Gumbel was very active in influencing bishops, declaring (in 2008):

All we're saying to the Church of England is, 'Please don't close any more churches – please give us those churches and we will plant into them wherever they are, in London, around the country, Newcastle, Chester, Halifax, doesn't matter where, just let us have the churches.'²³⁵

Whilst in London this worked out already for many years, outside of the capital HTB has treated with suspicion. In the past years this changed dramatically, given centrality that (HTB style) church planting currently has within the Church of England strategy. The pragmatic Church Growth theory driven approach of HTB seems to go well together with the concrete issues that many bishops have, while running their dioceses. In other words: HTB are regarded as solution providers. Archie Coates provides a telling illustration from the time he was leader of the St Peter's in Brighton:

So each time I met [the bishop], whether it was informally or at a meeting, I would always find myself saying: 'Let me know if I can help with anything'. And after we had been there for a few years, he said: 'We've got a church where we can't find a priest for, in Hastings. We've advertised it, but no one seems to want to go. It's a town centre church. Is that something you might be willing to help with? So that is really what kickstarted it. But I've always seen it as a partnership, [...] to be kind of a solution for your diocesan or area bishop. Because I don't know what it is like being a bishop, but I imagine that they have lots of problems on their plate [...]. But I haven't met a bishop who doesn't want their diocese or area to grow, they all want their churches to grow. So what can we provide as a resource church, that might help them in that?'²³⁶

This example is significant as St Peter's Brighton served as 'prototype' for the whole resource church model that was rolled out (with more than 100 of them in 2020) and Archie Coates is likely the HTB network's most influential leader by now, as he is the vicar of HTB London. The success of St Peter's began to change bishops' attitudes. Ric Thorpe writes:

Following HTB's plant to Brighton, invitations from diocesan bishops began to be given. [...] By this stage, Mark Elsdon-Dew, communications director at HTB, was asked by Nicky Gumbel to explore opportunities for planting more resource churches by meeting with bishops who were making specific requests for them. Increasingly, Mark, representing HTB, and myself in a more independent advisory

²³³ Atherstone, *Repackaging Christianity*, pp. 37, 116.

²³⁴ Atherstone, *Repackaging Christianity*, p. 40.

²³⁵ Atherstone, *Repackaging Christianity*, p. 230.

²³⁶ From a video of Archie Coates interviewed by Ric Thorpe. 'Resource Churches: Partnering with the Diocese' <https://ccx.org.uk/content/resource-churches-partnering-with-the-diocese/> (d.d. 22 July 2024).

role, would travel together to visit bishops and archdeacons to help diocesan teams to work out what it might look like for them. An acceleration of church planting began to happen nationally from HTB.²³⁷

As the network grew, this approach has become more sophisticated thanks to the establishment of the Revitalise Trust. Elsdon-Dew, now Director of Planting at the Revitalise Trust explains the role of the organisation:

It's there to help the dioceses plant churches. So my job is to go and help the Bishop of Nottingham to have to plant churches and we have somebody who will help with the building. Somebody will help with the budgeting. Somebody will help with this or that. But we don't pay for it. They have to pay for their own thing and they will apply. We will help them apply to the central funds of the Church of England. That's something else, we can help with that, but no, we are not a funding organisation as such. That's not what our donors give their money for.

Although sympathetic towards other networks Revitalise Trust only supports the planting of HTB churches. They are also responsible for the 'HTB leadership pipeline' (at least the last part of it), by finding the right leaders for a new church plant, and the Accelerator training programme that prepares curates to lead a church plant. This training is important as planting "requires quite a lot of skills that you don't necessarily learn at St Mellitus in your ordination training", including "how to deal with your bishop, how to how to run a council, a parish council, a government structure, how to read balance sheets, how to deal with safeguarding practicalities, budgeting practicalities of church leadership...". In other words: the HTB network raises leaders that work effectively within the Church of England system. However, this doesn't mean the connection between HTB church leaders and the diocese are always as strong as in Coates' example above. As one church leader indicates that in his situation "there's not a lot of dialogue, I would say, between the diocese and the HTB network."

The decades long demonstrated loyalty, pragmatism and professionalism, combined with active promotion within church hierarchy may well explain how the HTB network could become so dominant. However, one factor may be even most important: they deliver. Although a lot of resources are spent in establishing a resource church, many previous examples have demonstrated it will quickly grow, adding new church members to the diocese that contribute financially and many of them in a leadership role as well. In other words: a newly planted church will quickly become a net contributor, and even start establishing more of such churches! Overall, this means that establishing an HTB church is likely considered to be a safe investment for a bishop.

5.3. Dividers and connectors

Throughout this research, multiple themes emerged that impact the dynamics around network interaction. I will briefly touch upon the most important ones.

Historical divisions

Historically the Church of England could be divided into different fractions based on liturgy and theology, put simply: 'high church' Anglo Catholics, 'low church' Evangelicals, and Broad Church in the middle, with more space for liberal theological views. More recently, within the Evangelical faction a subdivision can be made between Conservative and Charismatic Evangelicals. Although there may be no sharp dividing lines between these different fractions (anymore), the divisions still impact the Church, including 'networks of new things'. For example: Nigel Wright recalls lots of evangelicals having interest in HeartEdge ideas and resources, but were not willing to be officially connected as it was deemed 'too liberal'.

²³⁷ Thorpe, *Resource Churches*, p. 22.

Mission

According to Sam Wells, the liturgical differences between different fractions are “in some ways [...] fairly trivial distinctions, and their understandings of mission in some ways are more significant.” In that sense a new division is emerging within the Church, with one hand a fraction that supports heavy investment in church multiplication, amongst others, through initiatives like resource churches and increased focus on ‘previously underinvested areas of deprivation’. On the other hand, there is a counter-reaction of those who believe the parish system should remain the cornerstone of the Church of England’s mission, most prominently represented by the Save the Parish movement.²³⁸ The Church of England leadership have been actively *crafting identity* (see §2.4) by promoting a new shared identity that encompasses both fractions, the mixed ecology, putting it even central in the strategy.²³⁹ There are indications that it resonates quite well throughout the Church.²⁴⁰

Prayers of Love and Faith

Whilst a shared vision for mission may indeed be achievable for the Church, one worrying theme was frequently mentioned during this research. In Wells’ words: “Unfortunately, we live at a time where one issue has emerged as a bit of a dividing line, and that’s sexuality.” A proposal to enable the blessing of same-sex couples – known as ‘Prayers of Love and Faith’ – has put enormous strain on the Church as a whole, described by one church leader as “a total mess”. It also shows a division between the different ‘networks of new things’, with one bishop strongly associated with FX as most vocal advocate of blessing same-sex couples, and HeartEdge also clearly promoting LHBTI-rights, whereas HTB and New Wine leaders signed a letter to voice their concerns about the process.²⁴¹

For HTB this is a clear shift, as for many years they refused be put into one of the camps, as it would only distract from – or even be detrimental to – mission. Interestingly, this is something all involved agree on, regardless of the side. In the words of one vicar: “It’s a second order issue, but from the other side made primary”.

Local and ‘local’

Despite all differences, connections usually do happen at a local level. For instance, Sam Wells indicated he recently had lunch with HTB vicar Archie Coates, and that one of his colleagues is joining HTB-dominated resource church training sessions. Most interviewed leaders actively engage with their fellow church leaders in deanery chapter meetings, sometimes leading to valuable connections. The most ecumenically potent connection point are likely city prayer initiatives, where people from a wide range of churches come together to pray for their city. Linda Maslen states that in a hard place like Bradford, city prayer is crucial:

I think that the prayer for Bradford is really important in terms of us looking as a whole church at how we bring Jesus into the centre of our city. You know, the Lord says that “where brothers and sisters work together in unity, that commands a blessing”, and I do think that is part of the blessing that’s been poured out on the city.

²³⁸ ‘Saving the Parish... now and for the future’ <https://www.savetheparish.com/> (d.d. 19 August 2024).

²³⁹ ‘Vision and Strategy’, <https://www.churchofengland.org/about/vision-and-strategy> (d.d. 19 August 2024).

²⁴⁰ Mentioned frequently in the interviews for this research. See also: Foulger, *New Things*, pp. 13-14.

²⁴¹ See: ‘Campaigners respond with fear and dismay to Bishops’ proposals to bless same-sex unions’ <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2023/20-january/news/uk/campaigners-respond-with-fear-and-dismay-to-bishops-proposals-to-bless-same-sex-unions> (d.d. 24 July 2024); ‘Letter to House of Bishops from the Anglican Alliance about Prayers of Love and Faith’ <https://anglican.ink/2023/12/14/letter-to-house-of-bishops-from-the-anglican-alliance-about-prayers-of-love-and-faith/> (d.d. 19 August 2024).

Toby Flint had a similar experience when moving to Bristol, where he noticed that “there's a really good network of churches across the denominations. Which I was immediately invited into and felt part of, which has been great.” Valuable as these initiatives may be, I have not come across anything close to ‘a gospel ecosystem for city’ (see §3.7) during this research.

Another important point of connection are festivals, that temporarily offer a ‘local’ community. At Focus not only HTB-network members join, but also people from other churches; this includes speakers, such as Sam Wells in 2014. Another festival that offers cross-network connections is the Greenbelt Festival, enabling connection between people from – amongst others – FX, HeartEdge and multiple parachurch organisations.

Church Multiplication Hub

Despite all this, the amount of connections between ‘networks of new things’ seem to be limited. Even when theological differences are small, the HTB ‘family culture’ makes it difficult for others to connect. Maslen recalls how as a (New Wine) resource church leader she was invited to all sorts of “HTB-stuff”, but “never quite felt like [she] fitted in because the binding of the network is so strong from an HTB perspective”. HTB resource church leader Flint recognizes the strong connection with other HTB leaders. However, he mentions a place that does offer cross-network connections: The Gregory Centre for Church Multiplication (CCX), founded by ‘church planting bishop’ Ric Thorpe. For Flint this is not only a place to ask Thorpe for practical advice, but there “are other people that I've probably come across different types of church plants, which has been interesting to hear about, and different models that have worked in different dioceses.”

CCX naturally has strong connections with the HTB network and the church hierarchy, but also FX, New Wine and HeartEdge are among its many partners.²⁴² It may be considered a ‘learning network’ (see §2.5) offering a wide range of resources, from hands-on knowledge to missional ecclesiological reflection, from Church Growth theory to pioneering, and from strongly institution-linked resource churches to anti-institutional-style lay-led movements (Myriad), with representatives from all domains involved. Given the diversity of people that are connected, the biggest strength of CCX may actually be its many weak ties (see §2.4).

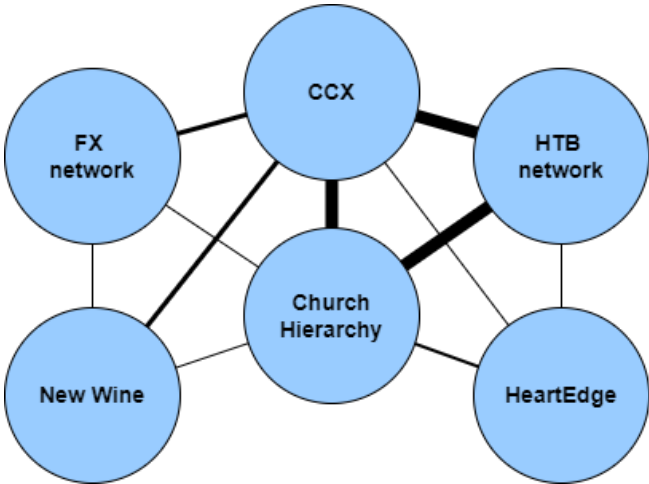


Figure 5.2: A ‘network of networks’

²⁴² ‘CCX Together’, <https://ccx.org.uk/together/> (d.d. 19 August 2024).

The centrality of CCX can be illustrated by visualizing a ‘network of networks’, where every network is one node (see figure above). The thickness of the line represents my own estimation of the strength of connection. It shows the unique position of CCX, which could make it – at last! – a place where innovation on behalf of the church can be rooted and made fruitful for the wider church (see my discussion of Stefan Paas in §3.2 and §3.8). It fits well with CCX’s envisioned role to “help the Church reach people in new and renewed ways”, playing an important part in a “movement” that is “forming new disciples and new congregations to reach the unreached in their community and the creation of ten thousand new Christian communities”.²⁴³

Seen this way, HTB may be hesitant of calling itself a movement, but could well be the family out of which the central hub for a large church multiplication movement was born...

5.4. Networks in a church ecosystem

This chapter I have slowly made the move from looking at separate networks to looking at the larger whole. From the perspective of the whole, I will answer the research question driving this chapter:

What kind of dynamics take place between these networks [of new things] and other parts of the Church of England, and what does that mean for the C of E as a whole?

The answer is complex, fragmented and sometimes seemingly contradictory. On one hand the Church of England is highly connected, thanks to all kind of different networks at many different levels. On the other hand there are sharp divisions and tensions at different levels as well. The whole may look ‘a mess’ and perhaps that is indeed what it is. Perhaps that is also what is *should* be; as complexity theory suggests, a complex environment requires a complex system. To be able to thrive in the challenging circumstances in which the Church finds itself, the Church of England may be moving towards the edge of chaos, which may be uncomfortable, but also potentially fruitful. As Alan Hirsch notes “In the face of a threat, or when galvanized by compelling opportunity, living things move toward the edge of chaos.”²⁴⁴

An integrated ecosystem

Moving *towards* the edge of chaos – or staying *at* it – is of course something else than moving *into* chaos. To enable sufficient stability, durable connections are crucial. In his book *Mixed Ecology: Inhabiting an Integrated Church* Ed Olsworth-Peter argues that simply mixing different types of church is not enough; they have to be *integrated*:

For the Church to grow, it needs to embrace the value of co-growing different expressions of Church and missional activity alongside one another. By maintaining their distinctness and living in active relationship they can benefit the mutual growth of the missional and ecclesial kingdom of God.²⁴⁵

There are hopeful signs of such ‘co-growing’ – especially at a local level and through CCX – that will hopefully develop further, not only to be able to overcome tensions within the Church but – most importantly – to serve the mission of the Church. I consider the language of ecology and ecosystems to be powerful, as it has the potential to help form a new identity for the Church of England, where

²⁴³ ‘We help the Church reach people in new and renewed ways’ <https://ccx.org.uk/about/#visionandvalues> (d.d. 19 August 2024).

²⁴⁴ Alan Hirsch quoting Pascale, Millemann, and Gioja in *The Forgotten Ways*, p. 176.

²⁴⁵ Ed Olsworth-Peter, *Mixed Ecology: Inhabiting an Integrated Church* (London: SPCK, 2024), p. 9.

every expression of church is valued and connectedness is celebrated.²⁴⁶ In other words: an identity were both time-honoured networks such as the church hierarchy and the parish system *together* with ‘networks of new things’ form something which may be a bit messy, but at the same time fruitful and very much alive!

Church as a Forest

For such an abstract concept like ‘ecosystem’, a concrete image may be helpful. Stefan Paas starts his book on church planting with the image of garden; a newly planted church can be regarded a garden that is, or at least should be, well suited for its local climatic conditions.²⁴⁷ Building on that, I am offering an image (or if you wish: a story) for the Church of England as a whole – that of a forest.²⁴⁸ What sets a forest apart from many other living things is that it’s closely connected to a specific geography; it’s not going anywhere.

Perhaps we may envision the Church of England as a forest that was planted long ago – such a long time that it feels as if it’s been around here forever. But the forest is under stress: soil erosion and changing climatic conditions have caused many trees to die, or to be in an unhealthy state. As the forest has been thinning out for many years, there are worries that the whole forest ecosystem is on the brink of collapse. However, the empty space in the forest has also provided opportunity for new species to enter: small and nimble pioneering plants found new ways accessing nutrients from the soil. Their lifespan may have been short in many cases, but it has improved the soil conditions to such an extent, that slower growing – more robust – plants and trees find their chance to grow now.

Next to that, new types of trees are introduced that seem to be well adjusted to the current climatic conditions, growing quickly and multiplying in all directions. Some of the older trees are also growing roots in a new directions, finding previously untapped resources present in the soil. The forest is changing: it is becoming more diverse – some would say ‘messy’, others would say ‘exciting’, ‘healthy’ or ‘beautiful’. New things and very old ones are being alive together, connected in multiple ways, not least by a very mysterious connector, hidden away in the soil.²⁴⁹

²⁴⁶ Next to this, it offers a welcome move away from military and business language that has dominated the mission-domain. Cf. Video ‘Stefan Paas – CMS Conversations Day 2019 Keynote’ <https://youtu.be/CtirByYIDH0>, mins 24-26 (d.d. 13 August 2024).

²⁴⁷ Paas, *Church Planting in the Secular West*, p. 1.

²⁴⁸ Comparing church with a forest is not a new idea. For an intriguing example of a closely connected church and forest: Fred Bahnson and Jeremy Seifert, *The Church Forests of Ethiopia - A Mystical Geography* (2020) <https://emergencemagazine.org/feature/the-church-forests-of-ethiopia/> (d.d. 19 August 2024).

²⁴⁹ In case it is not directly clear to what (or whom) I’m referring with the ‘hidden connector’: “...until the Spirit is poured upon us from on high, and the wilderness becomes a fruitful field, and the fruitful field is deemed a forest” (Isaiah 32:15, ESV).

Conclusion

This multifaceted investigation into all kind of networks connected to the Church has come to an end. I may now answer the question that has driven this research:

How can the structure and dynamics of ‘networks of new things’ within the Church of England be evaluated from a missional ecclesiological perspective?

For structuring my answer I am using the innovation framework (see §1.4 and §3.3).

Discontent

This provides the drive for doing new things, determining the dynamics of network growth.

- For the HTB network, discontent is closely linked to the classical Church Growth theory paradigm of large amounts of people not (yet) reached by Jesus. This is the driving force for ‘planting more churches’, resulting in a quickly growing network including ‘carefully engineered’ resource churches and ‘leadership pipelines’.
- For the Fresh Expressions network, discontent is about the church not *truly* connecting to people outside. Therefore practitioners value co-creativity (together with the context) and innovation highly, resulting in a much more diverse and decentralized network focused on learning and encouragement.
- For the HeartEdge network, discontent is more concerned with the church itself, which is regarded to operate on a outdated model and should be renewed, so it starts doing interesting things again. In that sense ‘network of *renewed* things’ may actually be a more appropriate term for HeartEdge.

Exploring

Different network structures have been explored over time, that sometimes work for a given period only. A crucial factor is money: an excellent connection with the church hierarchy and the fact that church plants (often) become net contributors quickly, means the HTB network has explored a resource-heavy structure. Decreased funding for FX and HeartEdge means they are exploring ‘lighter’ network structures.

Sense making

Theology matters for all networks. Soteriology matters, as ‘saving people’ and ‘bringing transformation’ are powerful drivers for continued growth, whereas ‘overcoming isolation’ provides a compelling rationale for all kinds of social networks including ‘networks of new things’.

Pneumatology is highly relevant, as in all ‘networks of new things’ the Holy Spirit is considered to be involved in the network dynamics. For HeartEdge and FX, the Spirit is regarded to be at work in the world already, inviting them to join in. For HTB, the Spirit is considered to be closely connected to the church, directing the network and responding to what happens in the network (such as prayer).

Amplification

Connectivity is crucial for amplification. Meeting with different practitioners is a fruitful way of amplifying new ideas in the HeartEdge and FX networks, and presumably also CCX.

The church hierarchy is an extremely important source of amplification as it can greatly (dis)amplify network growth by (not) providing opportunities and resources. HTB’s excellent connectivity with the church hierarchy as ‘solution providers’ may explain why the growth of the network has been amplified so strongly in recent years.

Edge of chaos

Being a church leader involved in establishing ‘new things’ can be tough and full of ‘chaos’. The one thing uniting all ‘networks of new things’ is the enormous added value that participants see in regularly connecting with (likeminded) peers. Experienced FX pioneer and New Wine resource church leader Linda Maslen sums it up best:

I think that networks are really, really important, and they're really, really important in something like a resource church. It can be a really lonely place, and a really lonely journey, a really challenging journey. Even if you've got a kind of team around you. So having connections is a way of staying healthy in it all.

Transformation

An integrated mixed-ecology Church of England is emerging, consisting of many networks – each with its own role. Perhaps the role of the three main networks in this research can be described as follows:

- HTB: ‘Resourcing powerhouse’ – extremely well placed for church growth contribution and further contextualization, to ensure growth even into the capillaries of society.
- HeartEdge: ‘Prophet of abundance’ – perhaps relatively small in size, but with a potentially catalytic message that is shared in word and deed, hopefully leading to church renewal.
- FX: ‘Custodian of pioneering’ – being a safe space for ‘pure breed pioneers’, well connected to their contexts and each other and to the Church of England (mainly) through intermediaries such as CCX.

Next steps

For those involved in research or church practice, hopefully this research has provided some ‘sense making’ regarding ‘networks of new things’ within the Church of England. I also hope a healthy amount of ‘intellectual discontent’ has been stirred. That is at least the case for myself. Therefore, I suggest further research in the following directions:

- Systematic theological reflection on networks and ecosystems.
- Further ecclesiological reflection on ‘networks of inherited things’.
- Research on ‘networks of new things’ in different churches and different contexts.

Networks, and ‘networks of new things’ specifically, are all around and a vital addition to theology and church practice. I hope and pray this master’s thesis is only a small, early step in exploring an exciting new work of the One who once said – and keeps saying – “See, I am doing a new thing!”.²⁵⁰

²⁵⁰ Isaiah 43:19, NIV.

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Appendix: interview questions

Introductory explanation

Thank you for you being available for this interview for my master's thesis research, which is about missional ecclesial networks within the Church of England, including the XXX network.

Before we start – two formal questions:

- Are you OK if I record this interview (just for my own purposes, to be able to make a transcription)
- Informed consent

In this interview we will focus on the XXX network, and your personal experience being part of the network. We may also touch upon your experience being part of other networks, or interacting with them.

Brief social/personal characteristics

Can you tell a bit about yourself and your role within XXX and within the XXX network?

Personal experience of the network

I'm interested what being part of the XXX network means for you personally.

Can share a moment, where you really valued being part of the XXX network?

Do you have a specific personal connection within XXX that is valuable to you?

I'm curious what is 'flowing' through the network:

Can you give a concrete example of something you have received from a different part of the XXX network?

E.g. money, ideas, prayer, friendship, people, something else

And also an example of something you have given?

E.g. money, ideas, prayer, friendship, people, something else

Has anything (meaningful for you) emerged, that without the XXX network would not have happened?

View of the XXX network

A bit more broad:

What does the XXX network look like from your perspective?

What kind of parts of the network do you see? (E.g. ecclesial communities, teams, key individuals, etc.)

Are there any key events, moments of interaction, media, etc. that are meaningful for you?

Is there a certain common identity in this network?

If yes: how would you describe it?

If no: how would you describe the situation?

Have you seen any change in the network over the past years?

Connection with wider church / other networks

Are any other networks that you value?

E.g. local church, or regional (E.g. local networks within CoE in your parish, deanery or diocese; local networks with different churches; local non-church networks)

National/international

Do you see any connection between that/those network(s) and the XXX network?

Do have an example where there was a connection between the XXX network and the YYY network?

If yes: could you elaborate on that?

Has something happened in one of these networks, that – in your view – would not have happened without this connection?

Bigger picture

What would be – in your view – the wider impact of the XXX network?

- Within the Church of England?
- Wider church?
- England?

Closing question

Is there anything that has not covered so far, that you would like to share?

Declaration Sheet Master's Thesis

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Title master's thesis: Networks of new things

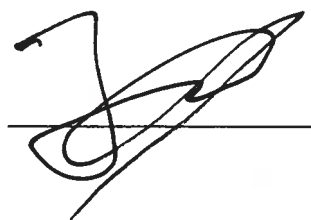
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