

## DISCERNMENT AND THE CHURCH MEETING

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My current research is an analysis of the Church Meeting and how it seeks to ‘discern the mind of Christ.’ It is based on participant observation of four churches. Each Church Meeting is observed and then used as a starting point for interviews of the minister and two members to discuss the experience of decision-making in the Church Meeting. My doctorate course is in practical theology, therefore practical theology provides the framework for my research. This short paper touches themes that form questions for the interview stage: revelation in community, reclaiming discernment, participation and silence in the Church Meeting.

### A PRACTICAL THEOLOGY APPROACH

The experience of listening to members making decisions together places this research project within practical theology, which takes “contemporary people’s experiences seriously as data for theological reflection.”<sup>1</sup> It was one critical incident within a discussion about a building project that led to this reflection on discernment. I sought try to understand why the incident took place and what theories might help me to lead the church towards a positive outcome as “the key questions of the interpretative task of practical theology.”<sup>2</sup>

My first pastorate was at Woolwich Central Baptist Church, London. The church site was due to be compulsory purchased as the large housing estate behind was to be redeveloped. While I was there we were in the early stages of discussing what kind of church we would like. As we began to discern the church of the future, the question of whether we would want a multi-purpose worship space arose. Our architect asked: “Would it be ok to play basketball in the same space as the church met on a Sunday?” And there was a physical gasp, right from the belly of some of members who could not imagine anything worse.

This incident highlighted that for some members at the church the physical space of the church was a sacred place where God dwelt and so should be set apart for congregational worship. Meanwhile for others it was in fellowship after a Sunday service that God could be found. The Anglican John Inge argues that a sacred place is relational and revelatory, as such form churches into being ‘storied’ places where all of life and worship is celebrated.<sup>3</sup> Inge’s category of a storied place is helpful as it describes how congregations are formed with stories and remembered in a special way at church. I suggest that a Baptist church is a storied church that includes marriages, deaths just as Inge argues, but for Baptists a storied church would encompass how decisions are made together. This autonomy is part of our character.

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Pattison and James Woodward eds., *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2000), 15.

<sup>2</sup> Richard R. Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 8.

<sup>3</sup> John Inge, *A Christian Theology of Place* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 36.

The discernment of the mind of Christ, whether done well or badly, gives character and shape to the congregation. At Woolwich the discernment process literally gave shape to the building. The revelation that we encountered transformed the project for the better. It is this sense of revelation in decision-making that I believe Baptists view as sacred even if it is not openly acknowledged. The qualitative research interviews will explore this theme of revelation at the Church Meeting. The interviews will provide a description and language of revelation experienced by Baptists. One outcome of the project is to then share examples of best practice of discernment in Church Meetings for the benefit of the denomination and beyond.

## REVELATION IN COMMUNITY

Theologians such as Susan White and Philip Sheldrake argue the community of the church carries revelation formed by liturgical gathering acts.<sup>4</sup> For Baptists, I offer that revelation also includes discernment at the Church Meeting as equal to and as an act of worship. Rowan Williams proposes that a holy place is understood in the “reality of a community ... [where Christians] see each other as signs of God’s mercy and liberty.”<sup>5</sup> It is essential for a Baptist church to function that revelation occurs at the Church Meeting. Church Meetings often include worship and for some Baptists, such as Phil Jump, are viewed as an act of worship.<sup>6</sup> A greater understanding of spiritual revelation within shared Baptist discernment is necessary.

The Baptist theological framework for community discernment is based on the overriding biblical belief in the priesthood of all believers.<sup>7</sup> Stephen Holmes argues further for the practice of the Church Meeting to be understood as the organizational expression of 1 Corinthians 2.16, which serves as prophetic protest<sup>8</sup> as it models radical community values and embodies equality.<sup>9</sup> In practice by affirming the priesthood of all believers, numerous Baptist theologians<sup>10</sup> affirm multi-voiced worship and the mechanism of the Church Meeting as it enables members to “be empowered and to think in mature ways. Freedom of conscience is fostered ... in discerning communities of faith.”<sup>11</sup>

The Church Meeting has offered an opportunity for empowering the oppressed, which is evident in historic examples in enslavement uprisings,<sup>12</sup> however as Holmes suggests, in everyday Church Meeting

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<sup>4</sup> Susan White, “A Theology of Sacred Space,” in *Sense of the Sacramental: Movement and Measure in Art and Music, Place and Time*, eds. David Brown and Ann Loades (London: SPCK, 1995), 39. Philip Sheldrake, *Spaces for the Sacred: Place, Memory and Identity* (Maryland: John Hopkins University Press, 2001), 32.

<sup>5</sup> Rowan Williams, *Open to Judgement – Sermons and Addresses* (London: DLT, 1994), 103.

<sup>6</sup> Phil Jump, *Healthy Church Meetings* (North West Baptist Association: Unpublished, 2007).

<sup>7</sup> 1 Peter 2.5 “You also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ”, NIV UK trans.

<sup>8</sup> Stephen R. Holmes, *Baptist Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2012), 102.

<sup>9</sup> Stephen R. Holmes, “Knowing Together the Mind of Christ: Congregational Government and the Church Meeting,” in *Questions of Identity: Studies in Honour of Brian Haymes*. Centre for Baptist History and Heritage Studies (Vol.6), eds. A. R. Cross & R. Gouldbourne (Oxford: Regent’s Park College, 2011), 181.

<sup>10</sup> See Paul S. Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces: Baptist Identity in Church and Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003) and Nigel Wright, *Challenge to Change: A Radical Agenda for Baptists*, (Eastbourne: Kingsway, 1991).

<sup>11</sup> Nigel Wright, *Baptist Basics 6: The Church Members Meeting* (Didcot: Baptist Union, 2009), 6.

<sup>12</sup> William Knibb, *Speeches of James Losh and the Reverend William Knibb on the Immediate Abolition of British Colonial Slavery Delivered at a Public Meeting Held in Brunswick Place Chapel, Newcastle 1833, Courant Office, Political Tracts 1719-1846* (J Blackwell & Co, 1833).

practice there is the distinct possibility of large-scale non-attendance of members or silence of those who do attend.<sup>13</sup> Mindful of the established baptistic framework of priesthood of all believers, I question to what extent the silence and or non-participation of members is seen to affect the discernment process and to what extent is a shared discernment process liberative.

## **RECLAIMING A PLACE OF DISCERNMENT**

The reality of life is reflected in my research in practical theology. Now in my third pastorate at New Southgate London, I can no longer focus on one church and one particular experience. My research has changed accordingly from the content of a question about a building project to the context of the Church Meeting in which that question was asked. When a Church Meeting is a place of discernment, church members find participation in decision-making affirming and exciting. My hope is to reclaim the process of discernment through understanding the value of participation of all members in decision-making.

Henri Lefebvre argues that communities of citizens who determine their own meaning are of greater value than individual people who inhabit the same place but only function as consumers.<sup>14</sup> The experience of taking part in a Church Meeting with discernment and one that merely receives reports echoes this distinction between citizens and consumers. Lefebvre further suggests that a society that creates opportunities for inhabitants to engage with one another will ‘through mutual recognition, test one another, and in this way, be strengthened or weakened.’<sup>15</sup> Although he is proposing a utopian vision for life, my hope is that a Baptist Church Meeting might be a place where by members are able to determine their meaning and be strengthened by the process.

Lefebvre’s ideal of the urban society has strong resonances with what a Baptist Church Meeting attempts to create, albeit on a much smaller scale. At a Church Meeting, all members are equal, all encouraged to participate and create the kind of church they desire for themselves and for their community. When the Church Meeting is functioning well it is a great source of solidarity for members. The original critical incident raises a concern about the sacredness of space for different ethnicities within the church. However it is only because we used our normative Baptist methodology of dialogue and discernment within a Church Meeting that this concern was heard at all. Furthermore, it was only because each person present felt confident to speak and participate in the process that a multitude of voices was heard. When this level of participation in discernment is achieved it is highly valuable to the health of the church.

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<sup>13</sup> Holmes, “Knowing Together the Mind,” 179.

<sup>14</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Urban Revolution*. Translated by Robert Bononno (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2003 [1970]).

<sup>15</sup> Lefebvre, *The Urban Revolution*, 96.

## **PARTICIPATION AND THE CHURCH MEETING**

Reflection is core activity within practical theology. Therefore as a researcher I analyze my concern for participation in decision-making with Heather Walton's question: "How do I position myself as narrator in this text?"<sup>16</sup> I recall an early formative experience of my own: "Once I was in a meeting as a young woman. I was the only woman and I was wearing bright red, so I really stood out, or so I thought. I made an excellent suggestion out-loud but I was not heard. The chairman ignored me. A few minutes later an older man made exactly the same point as his own and the idea was hailed as brilliant." *Research log, May 2017*.

When my voice was ignored I felt disempowered and disillusioned. I realize that my concern for participation in the Church Meeting is to ensure women are valued in decision-making. Further noting the dominance of men speaking at a Church Meeting causes me to consider the importance of women's participation in the Church Meeting.

In Nelle Morton's essay 'The Beloved Image' she argues that women live out of patriarchal constructed images and therefore she seeks to find alternative images that offer freedom for women.<sup>17</sup> Through a series of small group discussions she encounters women telling stories about their lived experience whereby "someone speaks precisely so that more accurate hearing may take place."<sup>18</sup> This thick storytelling and hearing is likened to empowerment. Morton states: "hearing in this sense can break through political and social structures to be heard by the disinherited."<sup>19</sup> Morton identifies Pentecost as a liberative image offering a reverse logic that evokes "hearing to speech."<sup>20</sup>

How then might the image of Pentecost reflect on the Church Meeting? Stephen Holmes argues that the Church Meeting is: "profoundly subversive of almost every human social order ... This is the church, where every social division is levelled and each person granted the dignity of one made in the image of God and remade through the sacrifice of Christ and the work of the Spirit."<sup>21</sup>

A lack of people being heard and speaking then is a difficulty for a Church Meeting, as it indicates that an alternative image where women are not welcome to speak or be heard is dominant. Participation in discernment could be part of a deep listening of other church members that encourages all members to value one and other. Further a Church Meeting that hears every voice enables the Spirit to be heard most fully.

## **SILENCE AND THE CHURCH MEETING**

Unfortunately, I know of plenty of church members who regularly attend the Church Meeting but have never spoken. Frances Ward's research in congregational studies causes me to consider the role of speech

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<sup>16</sup> Heather Walton, *Writing Methods in Theological Reflection* (London: SCM Press, 2014), xxii.

<sup>17</sup> Nelle Morton, *The Journey Is Home* (Beacon Press, Boston, 1985), 125.

<sup>18</sup> Morton, *Journey*, 127.

<sup>19</sup> Morton, *Journey*, 128.

<sup>20</sup> Morton, *Journey*, 127.

<sup>21</sup> Holmes, "Knowing Together the Mind," 185.

and the power of silence or withdrawal within a meeting and in research. In her ethnographic study in participation in the project was reduced through “absenteeism, sickness and fatigue of members.”<sup>22</sup> However she drew inspiration from Kamala Visweswaran who uses an example of a woman who refused to be a research subject and notes that the woman’s refusal or silence within a project can be seen as a powerful form of resistance.<sup>23</sup>

In reflection on my experience of silence in Church Meetings and Visweswara’s argument, I wrote in my journal: “If only non-participation in Church Meetings was due to a considered resistance, I cannot help but think it stems from apathy towards dull meetings that are repetitive, lack content to be discussed and attended out of a sense of duty. And so many people do not like speaking out-loud!” *Research log, April 2017*

In attempting to interpret a lack of spoken participation in meetings I found Donal Carbaugh to be persuasive in his argument that: “If speaking presumes a degree of membership and influence, then silence may signal social ambiguity and or/distance. Silence can be viewed as a way of dissolving, breaking, rejecting or refusing to recognise social bonds among participants”.<sup>24</sup>

I am intrigued to explore within an interview setting what kind of silence and speech members are offering. For those who do not speak at the meeting, I am interested to learn how they view they are taking part in decision-making process. If a church member can express concerns, fears or experiences about the Church Meeting and it can be addressed in such a way that they might have courage to speak in the future, then this would provide positive steps for change within the church.

## **WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?**

This research began by hearing a sharp intake of breath that led to a deeper discernment by church members. Practical theology calls for a reformulation of practice following reflection on experience. How then can discernment be explored and expanded within the Church Meeting?

My project hopes to redeem the Church Meeting by pursuing a greater appreciation for the revelation that is sought when members gather to pray and make decisions in and for the local community. It seeks to provide a language to appreciate shared revelation as a sacred place and uncover and suggest examples of best practice.

This research will highlight ways in which silence and non-participation can be understood and broader participation in the Church Meeting encouraged. Further that it will generate new ways of appreciating and revitalizing discernment at the Church Meeting. I will use both the image of Pentecost where Christians are united and heard into speech in miraculous ways and Lefebvre’s image of citizens engaging in mutual recognition as areas to explore in interviews.

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<sup>22</sup> Frances Ward, “The Messiness of Studying Congregations Using Ethnographic Methods,” in *Congregational Studies in the UK*, eds. Matthew Guest, Karin Tusting and Linda Woodhead (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 125.

<sup>23</sup> Kamala Visweswaran, *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), ch. 6.

<sup>24</sup> Donal Carbaugh, “Silence and Ethnography,” in *Cultural Communication and Intercultural Contact* (Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts, Psychology Press, 2009), 325.

If the Church Meeting fails to hear from all of the voices within its membership then it fails to hear the fullness of the Holy Spirit's voice and so operates with a limited image of God. At Pentecost everyone was filled with the Holy Spirit and was heard unto speech, and this reverse logic is part of being a church that is truly shaped and fashioned by the Holy Spirit, which is fundamental to being a discerning Baptist church.