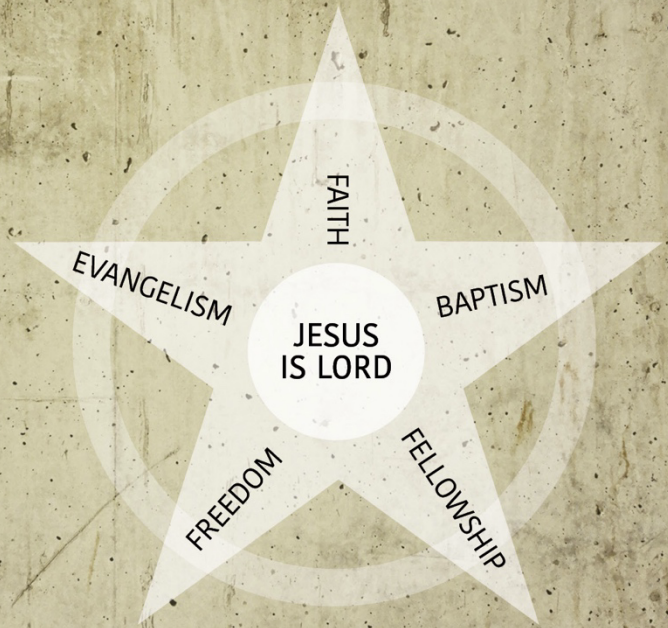


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Editorial

Andy Goodliff

We offer congratulations to Ruth Moriarty and Gale Richards who have both recently completed their doctorates.¹ We look forward to seeing the fruit of the research being shared more widely.

In January 2024, Theology Live, now in its sixth year, took at special focus on a theology of discernment. Learning to discern well is a theological practice that is deserving of attention. Two of the papers from that day are included in this edition of *JBTC*. The first is by Ruth which offers some reflections on how Baptists discern in the church meeting from her doctoral thesis. The second is by Anthony Clarke which explores the place of ministers in discernment, offering the concept of ‘holding the ring.’

The third article is from Derek Hatch, a Baptist theologian who teaches at Georgetown University. He offers his McCandless Lecture, delivered in May at Regent’s Park College, Oxford. Derek has an interest in Baptist and Catholic theology, and he argues in his lecture, using the practice of receptive ecumenism, a way of Baptist thinking about the theology of the local church from the Catholic theologian Jean-Marie Roger Tillard.

¹ For a list of PhDs (or equivalents) completed by British Baptists, including Ruth and Gale, see https://andygoodliff.typepad.com/my_weblog/british-baptist-phds.html.

Slow wisdom: Listening and discernment at the Church Meeting

Ruth Moriarty

Introduction

Through qualitative analysis of the Baptist Church Meeting, I identify a distinctive theological pattern for Baptist discernment: *slow wisdom*. Slow wisdom is characterised by prayer, listening to each other and God and exemplified in the best practice of small group work. Slow wisdom is held as embodied Christian practical wisdom which gives expression to the lived faith of Baptists. Baptists do not use slow wisdom when members who speak differently from the norm of the Church Meeting are excluded. If slow wisdom is used, the Church Meeting can return to a place of radical inclusion with the prophetic nature of discernment. By using a case study on mulled wine from Coleman Baptist church, this paper explores listening and hearing in slow wisdom compared to dialogue in education promoted by bell hooks² and discernment models used at the World Council of Churches.³ I argue that churches can host radical Church Meetings as Stephen Holmes⁴ suggests when slow wisdom alters the expected outcome of the Meeting fostering real change. I conclude that one way to change the design of the Church Meeting is by using small groups as a way of enacting Willie Jennings' call for Christians to attend to each other.

² bell hooks, *Teaching to transgress – Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

³ World Council of Churches, *Facilitating dialogue to Build Koinonia*. Faith and Order Paper No 235. Churches and Moral Discernment Volume 4 (Geneva, Switzerland: World Council of Churches Publications, 2021).

⁴ Stephen Holmes, 'Knowing the mind of Christ: Congregational government and the church meeting' in *Questions of Identity: Studies in honour of Brian Haymes* edited by Anthony R. Cross and Ruth Gouldbourne (Oxford: Regent's Park College, 2012), 172-88.

Case study: Mulled wine and the carol service at Coleman Baptist Church

Fiona is one of twelve participants from four sample churches in my qualitative research project into the practice of discernment at the Baptist Church Meeting. She is a chatty middle-aged White⁵ woman originally from Derbyshire, a Christian college administrator and former trustee from Coleman Baptist Church. Our interview took place in Fiona's home which was decorated with numerous family photographs and a collection of palm crosses and hanging decorations with spiritual mottos in the hallway. Fiona recalled a long-running contentious issue at Coleman Baptist Church: whether to have mulled wine at the annual carol service. Fiona said:

Fiona: Now this item had gone past various Church Meetings for years and years.

Ruth: I can imagine.

Fiona: And nothing had ever come of it, it had sort of got parked every single time. So, either we're gonna park it for good, or we're gonna have a proper discussion. And again, what had happened before was that there were a few loud voices.

Ruth: ahm-

Fiona: So, our student minister ... basically put everybody in small groups and he did the business with the stone, or book or whatever it was. And everybody has a minute with that thing in their hand and passes it around the circle, so there were little circles going on around the church. So, everybody had a chance to say something, and he set down ground rules about no interruptions, nobody to take over, nobody to question, everybody had their say. It was fascinating. Some groups it worked, others you had the usual people trying to take over. But at the end of it, we got a policy on alcohol.

Ruth: And what was the result?

⁵I have capitalised Black, Brown and White to engage with a form of orthographic justice which 'consciously chooses to capitalize Black, Brown, Indigenous, and White, we can take a small step towards a more just and inclusive world.' John Palfrey, *Capitalising White and Black* (USA: MacArthur Foundation, 2020), 1.

Fiona: The result was that we will allow alcohol on the premises under certain circumstances ...

Fiona: And at carol services we can offer mulled wine.

Ruth: Praise the Lord. [Both laugh] It's about the only Baptist church you can do it in, I think?!

There is a strong history of temperance support among Baptists, which means that it is still typical that Baptist churches do not have alcohol on the premises. As Brian Harrison records:

In 1860 Dawson Burns estimated that a sixth of the 1,400 Baptist ministers in Britain were abstainers, and that another third were sympathizers. In 1862 about half the intake of dissenting theological colleges had become teetotal. In all the denominations, the men of the future were by now becoming teetotallers ... John Clifford and C H Spurgeon among the Baptists.⁶

Indeed, it was Charles Spurgeon who planted⁷ Coleman Baptist church in 1867. Even today whether it is a formal rule or an informal rule, the use of alcohol in Baptist churches is acknowledged to be something of a touch-paper issue among members. Nonetheless, with the rise in popularity of carol services in the UK,⁸ it did not surprise me that Coleman Baptist attempted to discuss mulled wine at a Church Meeting.

Fiona's account highlights a long-running narrative of disagreement regarding mulled wine. A lack of decision is noted 'It got parked every single time' and a 'few loud voices' dominated. It took the courage of a student minister to approach the discernment task ahead from a different perspective. He chose an unfamiliar model for discussion, he set rules of conduct, and he enabled everyone to speak. Discernment was enabled by small group work. Critically Fiona identifies that this structure weakened the impact of loud voices and allowed more

⁶ Brian Harrison, *Drink and the Victorians – the temperance question in England 1815-1872* (2nd ed). (Staffordshire, UK: Keele University Press, 1994), 169.

⁷ Coleman Baptist Church website, accessed 27/03/2023.

⁸ David S. Walker, 'Cathedral Carol Services: Who Attends and Why?' In *Anglican Cathedrals in Modern Life* edited by Leslie J. Francis (Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 2015), 111-130.

members to speak. Changing the format of the Church Meeting altered the previous balance of power among members and forged a broader sense of discernment among the members.

Listening to the Body of Christ

Listening to members speaking at the Church Meeting is identified by participants as part of the process of discernment for Baptists. Matthew is a White nearly retired minister, currently leading Jarman Baptist. Jarman is a bustling church with a medium-sized congregation, recently supplemented by new Christians from Iran moving into the area. As I sat in his manse study, my eye was drawn to his large collection of Celtic spirituality books, two desks busy with paper and various embroidered maps of areas of the UK where he had been in ministry in the past. On discernment, Matthew said:

I think the key to it is listening to each other and giving space to listening to God through one and other. Which means if you're going to do listening well, you've got to give it time and you've got to hear and then process that hearing. So, if you try to [do] something just in one meeting that just doesn't happen (Matthew).

Integral to discernment is then the time necessary to hear and process members' contributions over more than one Church Meeting. Listening is offered to one another as members and to and from God in prayer. Haymes et al recognise this trait of Church Meeting discernment as well, stating:

Faithfulness to Christ in church meetings shows itself in patient listening, with space for the dissenting voice, and willingness to go on waiting and praying when we are not sure where God is leading us.⁹

Faithfulness to Christ is seen by Haymes et al to mean a renewed appreciation of the church as the body of Christ, 'to recapture the

⁹ Brian Haymes, Ruth Gouldbourne, and Anthony Cross, *On Being the Church: Revisioning Baptist Identity* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2008), 51.

understanding of what it is to be the church in this place with Christ as our head.¹⁰

Matthew develops this image of the body by discussing the role of the members in listening to each other and God: 'I've tried to talk about the essence of a Church Meeting as being about the responsibility to listen rather than the right to speak'. The responsibility referred to here is to one another as members and to the belief that God might speak to any member of the congregation, all contributions, all members need each other in the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12.12-27). Likewise, Elizabeth Newman outlines that the corporate nature of the church should not be seen as an individual right but ought to be 'understood as a gift to the whole from God into which we grow.'¹¹ Listening to other members speak at a Church Meeting forms the wisdom Baptists use to discern to be slow. It is also a necessary expression of the ecclesiology of the Baptist church's understanding that members are the body of Christ.

Hearing into action

While recognising the value of listening within the Church Meeting, the contribution of this project is to note that the majority of participants spoke of the value of hearing other members speak at the Church Meeting to discern the mind of Christ. Two types of hearing are specified: a multitude of different voices and hearing a lone prophetic voice. Both are understood to guide discernment in new directions and offer an inclusive participatory decision-making practice. I argue that hearing as a physical attribute operates for participants as attentive listening to discern, for members do not simply hear the sound of another voice, the contribution of the voice to the Meeting changes the outcome. In this sense, slow wisdom is a doing discernment for Baptists to hear into action. For example, Coleman Baptist church had an historic issue regarding closing a playgroup that used the premises, which Fiona and the other deacons had discussed. The diaconate had brought a proposal to the Church

¹⁰ Haymes, Gouldbourne, and Cross, *On Being the Church*, 53.

¹¹ Elizabeth Newman, 'The Priesthood of All Believers and the Necessity of the Church' in *Recycling the Past or Researching History: Studies in Baptist Historiography and Myths* edited by Philip E. Thompson and Anthony R. Cross (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005), 62.

Meeting and expected that their recommendation would be accepted. However:

Fiona: We had a couple of voices, not people we were used to hearing from in a Church Meeting. We heard anger, passion. She was expressing how she felt, so that was important, but it did turn the Meeting. If it hadn't had been for that one or two people, things might have glided through.

Likewise, Hedger Baptist facing a financial challenge was looking for guidance from God when Nell shared: 'It might be what someone else says at the church, that's why I think it is important to hear everyone' (Nell). To make a decision, Baptists discern by hearing and listening to dissenting and different voices.

Nell Morton writes concerning a feminist imagining of a feminist perception of the universe which 'demands a new way of hearing that awakens speech and a new way of seeing.'¹² She observes small groups of women sharing painful stories which gave way to silence. Morton concludes that women are heard into speech whereby a 'hearing engaged by the whole body evokes speech, a new speech, a new creation'.¹³ Hearing in this embodied manner is an act of empowerment which 'breaks through political and social structures to be heard by the disinherited.'¹⁴ Morton's hearing is grounded in both God who listens to humanity and the biblical story of Pentecost (Acts 2.1-4), where the wind of the Spirit is heard first, fills each of the disciples and then each is heard speaking in different languages. As Elaine Graham suggests, Morton views hearing into speech as 'giving birth to a new language of liberation.'¹⁵ Baptists value hearing different voices in discernment. Baptists listen carefully to emotion and the lone voice, listening in this way turns the Meeting from an expected outcome to an outcome believed to be the mind of Christ.

¹² Nell Morton, *The Journey is Home*, (Boston, USA: Beacon Press, 1985), 125.

¹³ Morton, *The Journey is Home*, 125.

¹⁴ Morton, *The Journey is Home*, 128.

¹⁵ Elaine Graham, 'Hearing one another to speech', *Church Times*, 3 January 2007. Retrieved 23/4/23 from <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2007/5-january/comment/our-task-hearing-one-another-to-speech>, 1.

Dialogue in the World Council of Churches and slow wisdom

The World Council of Churches (WCC) identifies a similar approach to slow wisdom in collective discernment which it defines as listening to the conscience of the church using dialogue to generate unity. While the emphasis of slow wisdom is discernment through listening in a local context and expecting the prophetic to be heard afresh from lay church members, the WCC draws on a broader range of forms of scripture, culture and church tradition to discern. There are, however, similarities which connect the two practices: bounded time frames for discernment, the aim of participation of all members and a shared value in seeking unity.

Faith and Order paper no 235 states that:

Churches, as communities, have a collective desire to pursue God's will in a given situation; the communities draw on collective knowledge and wisdom to develop and apply relevant criteria to the issue; these communities reach a collective judgment in light of these criteria and reasoning; and the communities act upon these judgments together. These included not only the guidance of the Holy Spirit, scripture and tradition, but also teaching and decision-making authority, spirituality and church culture. The lived experience of individuals and groups directly involved in particular moral issues is a critical part of the process of moral discernment.¹⁶

Christian communities within the WCC recognise the varied influences on pursuing God's will in a broader context of ecumenical dialogue. A large section of the paper contains pictorial images similar to flow charts for discerning or pursuing God as churches, however, the paper argues that the model does not propose a method rather it alerts churches to what is at stake when discerning together:

Drawing attention to all the relevant elements and how they reflect various faith commitments may help dialogue partners to at least acknowledge the possibility of different reasoning

¹⁶ World Council of Churches, *Facilitating dialogue*, 12-13.

processes on moral issues so that they are able to remain committed to the quest for visible unity.¹⁷

Fostering dialogue between partners expands the slow wisdom approach of listening to each other and highlights the responsibility to accept differences within the church and a commitment to learn from them in the pursuit of unity. A good example of this was seen at Coleman Baptist regarding the consumption of alcohol at carol services. In the World Council model, we see Coleman Baptist recognising 'that they may be more than one morally acceptable ground and norm' and 'what was once thought unacceptable in all circumstances is now seen as morally acceptable in some new circumstances for the same reason as the previous prohibition'.¹⁸ Through listening to others, Coleman Baptist reversed previous decisions regarding alcohol to be more effective in its mission and attract more people to attend carol services. While slow wisdom highlights the importance of listening, it is enhanced by exploring how listening can be a form of dialogue, particularly in the use of small group work to bring change to existing problems faced by the local church.

A radical place: the classroom and the Church Meeting

At Coleman, the overturning of the churches historic decision regarding mulled wine felt revolutionary for Fiona. The enabling context of this change was the Church Meeting. It was the reformed structure of the Church Meeting through using small groups of members, listening to each other and God that through dialogue brought change. In my mind, the Church Meeting therefore provides a potentially radical place for change in every Baptist church. However, there remains great challenges faced by ministers and members with Church Meetings gone sour with conflict or frozen in time and ability to act. To which end, Ernie Whalley wrote in the *Baptist Times* in 2014 – ought not the Church Meeting be scrapped?¹⁹ My argument is to

¹⁷ World Council of Churches, *Facilitating dialogue*, 47.

¹⁸ World Council of Churches, *Facilitating dialogue*, 46.

¹⁹ Ernie Whalley, 'Church Meeting: time to be scrapped or time for a radical change?', https://www.baptist.org.uk/Articles/391710/February_2014_Church.aspx

adjust our gaze to see the potential of discerning together and to reform our practice through using slow wisdom to discern.

A parallel example to consider is the reformation of education by bell hooks²⁰ in contrast to the Church Meeting. In hooks' work on education, she recognises the historic issues surrounding the classroom: For years it has been a place where education has been undermined by teachers and students alike who seek to use it as a platform for opportunistic concerns rather than a place to learn. And yet she also maintains that 'The classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy'²¹ if an engaged pedagogy is used where dialogue in learning is valued. In hooks' analysis, the classroom has been used as a tool to reinforce gender, racial bias and colonization of the mind in the USA.²² Inspired by the work of Paulo Freire, hooks argues for an engaged pedagogy: 'We break with the notion that our experience of gaining knowledge is private, individualistic and competitive. By choosing and fostering dialogue, we engage mutually in a learning partnership.'²³ The classroom is reformed by hooks' approach to creating learning opportunities that are characterised by sharing in knowledge generation, engaged students who are fully participating through listening and taking part in dialogue-based learning together.

Helen Mirza argues that hooks' model of renewing existing education through engaged pedagogy is not radical enough. Instead, Mirza highlights the value of subversive pedagogy offered by Black supplementary schools. Mirza argues that change in education needs to be more than oppositional, instead through supplementary schools where 'an alternative world with different meanings and shared ways of knowing'²⁴ can be offered. She proposes that a radical place of possibility is found by:

[Supplementary schools] operating within, between, under and alongside the mainstream education and labour market

²⁰ bell hooks, *Teaching to transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

²¹ hooks, *Teaching to transgress*, 12.

²² hooks, *Teaching to transgress*, 24-29.

²³ hooks, *Teaching to transgress*, 43.

²⁴ Helen Mirza, *Black British Feminism – a reader* (London: Routledge, 1997), 273.

structures subverting, renaming and reclaiming oppression for their children through their transforming pedagogy of 'raising the race'.²⁵

Mirza's argument contrasts with hooks' approach of renewal from within pre-existing systems of education and her attempts at reclaiming the classroom. Mirza identifies the importance of subversive and supplementary pedagogies. hooks chooses to delight in the renewal of minds by offering an engaged pedagogy and so attempts to bring radical change to the existing institution.

There are elements of subverting the Church Meeting within the data set of this project. In some sample churches, supplementary meetings were created to discern together, for example Jarman Baptist used a separate meeting to consider a youth worker appointment outside of the Church Meeting. While Mirza argues for subversive and separate pedagogy to be the most radical solution, hooks' argument for the renewal of the classroom from within the education system seems the most sustainable and aligns more closely to the good practice found in the Coleman case study. Likewise, a renewed practice of discernment can be subversive and transformational as argued by Stephen Holmes. He argues that Church Meeting offers a radical model of transformation as it 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.²⁶

I propose that a Church Meeting can subvert power structures to hear and explore differences of opinion, theology and expression from members with small group work. Holmes states this approach affirms the dignity of members as created in the image of God. This project

²⁵ Mirza, *Black British Feminism*, 274.

²⁶ Stephen Holmes, 'Knowing the mind of Christ: Congregational government and the church meeting'. In A. Cross and R. Gouldbourne (eds). *Questions of identity – studies in honour of Brian Haymes*. Centre for Baptist History and Heritage Studies Vol.6, (Oxford: Regent's Park College, 2012), 185.

data indicates that members are empowered through listening to each other and being heard at the Church Meeting. Small group work offers a way of listening to others that helps Baptists to critically discern the mind of Christ in slow wisdom. The best practice of slow wisdom echoes the communal nature of learning through dialogue through listening to other members in discernment and seeking the mind of Christ together as the gathered church. The Church Meeting offers a radical possibility for members to listen to each other, encounter prophetic voices and uphold the value of each member as part of the body of Christ.

Changing the design of the Church Meeting

The case study on mulled wine highlights the benefits of group discussion for Baptists: listening to each other, hearing each other and participating in dialogue. Furthermore, small group discussion alters the outcome of discernment by structural change to the design of the church meeting and reminds us of the Baptist radical theological belief that all members can discern as the body of Christ. Since 2008, Haymes, Gouldbourne and Cross have called for new practices at the Church Meeting ‘which give content to our language of discerning the mind of Christ together, so that shared discussion really happens about issues that matter.’²⁷ Likewise, Angela Reed argues that congregational governance-led churches ‘require structure for discernment.’²⁸ This project seeks to give content to this hope by offering to every Baptist Church practical yet profoundly Baptist theological method for assuring Baptist identity as a gathered church to continue and to thrive. Small group work offers a flexible structure to the Church Meeting as an inclusive and participatory practice for discernment. The idea of using small groups is not extraordinary in itself, however from observation, they are not regularly employed in Church Meetings. Yet when the approach is embraced as at Coleman, a greater level of unity is generated which increases attendance and slow wisdom is more easily achieved.

²⁷ Haymes et al, *On Being the Church*, 91.

²⁸ Angela Reed, *Quest for spiritual community: Reclaiming spiritual guidance for contemporary congregations* (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 169.

Willie Jennings writes in *After Whiteness* of the need to develop spaces for critical listening within theological education to address issues of inclusion in the academy. Jennings calls for change by reforming the design of education: ‘We should work towards a design that aims at an attention that forms deeper habits of attending to one another and to the world around us.’²⁹ As a first step, I argue that using the practice of group work at the Church Meeting enables attending or listening to one another in such a way as to bring real change. The design of small group work within the structure of the Church Meeting is just one way that members can attend to each other. As Jennings’ poem expresses, attending to each other is deeper than listening:

I will listen, but I am not hear
You will speak, but you are not here-ing
You here me – putting me in my place
But this is not my place, it belongs to
Those not wanting escape, me
I am gone, my inside outside already
Searching to hear where I am heard
As I listen.³⁰

Attending to one another for Jennings is to offer an intellectual affection that is ‘open toward more intense listening and learning from one another.’³¹ Jennings provides a key example of the design and affections of an educational institution formed by European values above all else. His critique sheds light on the Baptist Church Meeting where there may be preferred terms of speech or theology and little room for difference. I argue from the project data that group work which carefully helps each person to express their opinion will offer one way for differences to be shared and explored at a Church Meeting. If steps to attend to each other are practiced at the local Church Meeting, I suggest that broader discernment at regional and national levels might be renewed as well.

²⁹ Willie James Jennings, *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020), 51.

³⁰ Jennings, *After Whiteness*, 72-73.

³¹ Jennings, *After Whiteness*, 67.

The theological pattern of slow wisdom provides Baptists with a model for change at the Church Meeting. By modifying the design of Church Meetings to include small group work, members attend to each other and so disrupt pre-existing power structures with radical inclusion. Listening and attending to different prophetic voices in dialogue at the Church Meeting is critical to discernment, to the practice of slow wisdom and the vitality of the Baptist church gathered as the body of Christ.

Notes on Contributor

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Holding the Ring: Discernment and Leadership¹

Anthony Clarke

I don't think it is controversial to suggest that good discernment requires good leadership. You find a little in the literature on leaderless groups – but not very much. You find some more in the popular leadership literature on the idea of revolving leadership, as leadership is exercised by different people in a group depending on context and task. Some write more positively; others more critically, preferring to stress the few established leaders.² Good discernment requires good leadership – that would be agreed – but where does the work of the few and the contribution of the many fit in?

If, in particular, we are talking about discernment in a Baptist context, how might we offer a theological account of leadership that underpins a practice of good discernment? I would like to frame an answer by drawing on two theological ideas – one Baptist and intentionally shaped by Baptist ecclesiology; the other offering broader theological perspectives. For me, an early experience of Baptists doing theology well was at the Baptist Assembly held in London in 1997. Brian Haymes, then Principal of Bristol Baptist College, introduced a new report published by Council the year before, on *Transforming Superintendency*.³ I forget much of the detail, but what I do remember was Brian's insistence that if we are going to think theologically about practice then we need to begin with God. Unusually, I suspect, for Baptist Union reports, the document begins with an exposition of a

¹ This was an address first given at *Theology Live* January 2024 and repeats and develops material first published as 'Holding the Ring: The Marginal Leadership of All' in *Attending to the Margins: Essays in Honour of Stephen Finamore* edited by Helen Paynter and Peter Hatton (Oxford: Centre for Baptist Studies, 2022). I am grateful for the original publishers making this available.

² For example, Eddie Gibbs, *Leadership Next* (Leicester: IVP, 2005), p. 96 offers a positive view of rotating leadership; Bill Hybels, *Courageous Leadership* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 86 offers a rejection of such an approach.

³ *Transforming Superintendency: the report of the General Superintendency Review Group presented to the Baptist Union of Great Britain Council November 1996* (Didcot: Baptist Union, 1996).

particular understanding of God as Trinity. We may or may not agree with all the details of Haymes' theological account, but it is crucial that this is where he chose to start. So let me to begin with a particular theological account of God as Trinity.

David Cunningham offers what is to me a compelling vision of what he describes as 'polyphony', located firmly in a relational trinitarian theology. Cunningham argues that 'the claim that 'these three are one' – the title of the book – calls into question the common assumption that oneness and difference are mutually exclusive categories.⁴ As part of this Cunningham then explores the musical expression of polyphony – you can play several notes at the same time so that they enhance each other, or an orchestra will draw in different instruments in such a way that the inclusion of one does not mean the diminishing of another. 'Christianity proclaims a polyphonic understanding of God . . . Attention to any one of the Three does not imply a diminished role for the others; all three have their distinctive melodies and are all 'played' and 'heard' simultaneously without damage to God's unity.⁵ Such divine polyphony allows us to see the created world in a similar perspective, particularly so that theology can, and ought to, be conceived as a musical endeavour and as 'bearing "musical" character.⁶ Cunningham argues that 'theology has operated with false dichotomies in which it is assumed that increased attention to one element necessarily decreases the significance of the other.⁷ He proposes instead that we must ask whether things can be so seen that multiple sources can be heard contributing to the greater whole, without the individuals being side-lined. We should not assume that the addition or increase of one thing means a decrease in another. Cunningham is working from broader convictions about the way we should best express the trinitarian nature of God that strongly stress the relational nature of God as Trinity. In this respect his work chimes with that of people like Miroslav Volf and Paul Fiddes. Not all would agree with those theological convictions.⁸ But I don't think you need to

⁴ David Cunningham, *These Three are One: The Practice of Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 127.

⁵ Cunningham, *These Three are One*, 129.

⁶ Cunningham, *These Three are One*, 129.

⁷ Cunningham, *These Three are One*, 128.

⁸ For an introduction to this debate see Jason Sexton (ed.), *Two Views on the Doctrine of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan 2014).

agree with all that Cunningham argues about trinitarian theology to draw on his discussion on polyphony. Nor does Cunningham offer a simplistic and naïve account that somehow, we are imitating God. Rather, he finds a connection between God's life as polyphonic and various aspects of the created order. I want to suggest that one helpful way we can understand leadership, especially Christian leadership, is as polyphonic.

Alongside Cunningham's account of polyphony, I want to add a particular Baptist ecclesiological perspective drawn from Nigel Wright. Wright has long argued that Baptist ministry should be understood as 'inclusive representation', that while ministry is exercised by the whole church in which all participate, it is also exercised by some, set aside and ordained as ministers, in a particular and focused way. Such ministers represent the whole church in an inclusive way in which all are part of the ministry, rather than in an exclusive way.⁹ It is, of course, difficult to define what Baptists might deem to be normative in their theology, but it seems that if any view of ministry holds some kind of consensus, then it is Wright's language of inclusive representation. Paul Goodliff suggests that after the presumed consensus of the post war years there then developed a much greater diversity of views of ministry among Baptists, but in the twenty-first century 'a growing trend is to read ministry as inclusive representation and to do so with a sacramental form and theology.'¹⁰

There is a sense that Wright developed this language in an intentional irenic way, offering language that might bring these divergent Baptist approaches into some coalition. Many seem content with such a description, and those who would want to say more than this, perhaps advocating a more sacramental understanding of ministry want to say at least this.

Wright's understanding of ministry also seems to follow on from other ways that UK Baptists have sought to understand ministry. There is

⁹ Nigel Wright, 'Inclusive Representation: Towards a Doctrine of Christian Ministry', *Baptist Quarterly* 39.4 (October 2001): 159–74.

¹⁰ Paul Goodliff, *Ministry, Sacrament and Representation: Ministry and Ordination in Contemporary Baptist Theology and the Rise of Sacramentalism* (Oxford: Regent's Park College, 2010.), 157.

the classic statement from the 1948 Baptist Union Council statement *The Baptist Doctrine of the Church* and echoed in the later report *Forms of Ministry Among Baptists*:

Ministry is exercised by the whole Church as the Body of Christ, which thus ‘preaches the Word, celebrates the sacraments, feeds the flock and ministers to the world’; but some individuals are called to spiritual leadership, exercising forms of ministry in a representative way on behalf of the whole.¹¹

I want to combine these two theological insights to offer an account of leadership more generally and then suggest how this might be significant for discernment more specifically. Any account of practice amongst our churches and the operant theology it contains will point to a significant variety of approaches in the exercise of leadership. There is clearly an account of leadership that stresses that discernment resides in those appointed as leaders, perhaps with a stress on their divine appointment. Leaders discern and decide and cast vision. Such a theology makes a very clear distinction between those who lead and those who follow. Such a view among Baptist writers is probably most clearly expressed by Brian Winslade, a Baptist minister from New Zealand who has also worked in Australia and USA. Winslade takes a very strong and explicit view of the senior pastor as leader, and resists the idea that leadership is exercised through the congregation. So Winslade contests that ‘a danger of overemphasis on the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers can be a subtle belief in the leadership of none or, worse still, the leadership of all. Congregational government does not imply congregational leadership.’¹² Winslade and others who write in a similar way from an American Baptist perspective have had some influence among British Baptists.

¹¹ *Forms of Ministry Among Baptists* (Didcot: Baptist Union, 1994), 17, quoting *The Baptist Doctrine of the Church*, *Baptist Union Documents 1948-77* edited by in Roger Hayden (London: Baptist Historical Society, 1980), 8.

¹² Brian Winslade, *A New Kind of Baptist Church: Reframing Congregational Government for the 21st Century* (Macquarrie Park, NSW: Morling, 2010), 4-5.

Simon Kelly,¹³ in contrast, offers an interesting commentary of the temptation in culture to mythologise the single leader. Kelly recounts both the story of Chesley Sullenberger III who famously landed a plane without engines in the Hudson River and a piece of research conducted afterwards into the way this story was recounted in the press. What was in fact a very complex set of processes that involved many different people, events, and conditions was simplified into the heroic act of one man, because the USA needed a hero. It suggests that Sullenberger was portrayed as the classic all American masculine hero, modest, impeccably smart, silver-grey hair with his humility adding further to his hero image. There is a similar tendency and danger in some of the more popular Christian literature to idolise the one gifted leader, with damaging consequences.

Then there is also an account of leadership which suggests that discernment does rest with the whole church but the leadership of that process resides clearly with the elected leaders. There is perhaps epitomised in what has become a reasonably commonplace statement that suggests Baptist believe in the ministry of all and the leadership of some. Paul Beasley-Murray thinks this had long been accepted by Baptists,¹⁴ but in reality, it is actually limited to a small number of authors from the end of the twentieth century onwards. The first time I am aware it is used is by Mike Nicholls in 1990 who simply suggests this is 'biblically right.'¹⁵ It is then used as the title of Beasley-Murray's contribution to a collection of essays on ordination in 1993,¹⁶ and the subheading in a chapter on 'Ministry and Members' in Nigel Wright's 2005 book *Free Church Free State*, although with some caveats,¹⁷ and repeated by Beasley-Murray in 2006¹⁸ and 2015.¹⁹

¹³ Simon Kelly, 'Leadership and Process' in *Leadership: Contemporary Critical Perspectives* edited by Brigid Carroll, Jackie Ford and Scott Taylor (London: Sage, 2015), esp., 180-83.

¹⁴ *Baptist Times*, 1 April 2011.

¹⁵ Mike Nicholls, 'Ministry: Mean What you Say', *Fraternal* 230 (1990): 13.

¹⁶ Paul Beasley-Murray (ed.), *Anyone for Ordination* (Tunbridge Wells: Marc, 1994), 157-74.

¹⁷ Nigel Wright, *Free Church, Free State: The Positive Baptist Vision* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005), 160.

¹⁸ Paul Beasley-Murray, *Radical Believers: the Baptist Way of Being the Church* (2nd Ed.; Didcot: Baptist Union, 2006), 114.

¹⁹ Paul Beasley-Murray, *Living Out the Call* (Self-published e-book in four volumes, 2015), 30-1.

There is a helpful intent here to resist any clerical paradigm. It is not just ministers who exercise ministry, but all are involved. But there is also here a desire to find language that separates out the role of the many to share in ministry and the role of the few to offer leadership. There seems to be a real irony here, though, in rejecting one form of dominance for another. The fundamental problem it seems to me is this desire to separate out roles – it seems too messy and complicated to say that all share in ministry and some share in ministry in particular ways; so, some authors have looked for a simpler and more binary approach.

In contrast, I want to propose a different approach to leadership – shaped by the two theological positions of polyphony and inclusive representation. I suggest we should best understand leadership as a relational practice in which the whole church share, within which some exercise leadership in particular ways. To pick up the language of the 1948 Baptist Union statement, the Church not only preaches the Word, celebrates the sacraments and feeds the flock, it also offers leadership. Or, following from Wrights' inclusive representation approach, I want to argue for the leadership of all and the leadership of some, which suggests that the leadership of all and the leadership of some is not a 'zero sum game', in which there is limited 'leadership' to be divided out. This is the significance and insight of a truly polyphonous approach. Too much of the literature seems to me to work on a binary and analytic approach: if I am a leader, you must be a follower; and if you are a leader, I must be a follower so can't be exercising leadership. A polyphonic approach suggests that leadership can be exercised by multiple people without what one offers being diminished. In the same way that the orchestra is not diminished by what each instrument brings, with different instruments at times taking a lead, so leadership in our churches is not diminished when it is offered by the many not just the few.

There has been in recent years a lament from some that in church life the gift most frequently downplayed, side-lined or avoided is the gift of leadership.²⁰ Am I being unkind when I notice that those who make

²⁰ See, for example, Martin Young, *Church Meetings* from Freshstreams, available at <https://freshstreams.net/wp-content/uploads/Church-Meeting-Martin-Young.pdf>; Andrew Rollinson (ed.), *Transforming Leadership: Essays Exploring Leadership in a Baptist*

such a claim tend to be those who think they have the gift of leadership! The lament, therefore, is a complex one which seems to express a frustration that some feel they have not been able to exercise *their* leadership gifts in the way *they* would like. Presumably because they think that the actions and decisions of others have not allowed them the space to lead. This seems to me to be the language of the zero-sum game – what you offer diminishes my contribution. I want to argue that we should see such a situation quite differently through the image of polyphony and ask how the leadership of all contributes to a greater whole. We value the gifts of leadership given to some who exercise these in a particular way, and we should expect those who are ministers to be actively engaged in the practice of leadership. But equally, we value the leadership of all, because the more who contribute to discernment the richer and deeper the polyphonus result.

Holding the Ring

One metaphor we might use to describe this kind of polyphonic inclusive leadership is that of ‘holding the ring’. It is a metaphor that emerged for me out of a conversation with a friend, and other former Principal at Bristol, Steve Finamore. To exercise leadership is to hold the ring. I want to suggest this means two things for how leadership is needed and is used in discernment.

First, writing at this point as a minister, I hold the ring for others, so that the leadership of all is exercised. Part of being set aside for ministry will involve the exercise of leadership, but I do this in a way that aims for all to be involved, this is inclusive representation. I have no interest in arguing that there should not be those elected to certain offices in the church or that we should avoid the issue of power. We must face up to the ways that power is always present, held and used. But I suggest that the ‘few’ will exercise their leadership in a way that holds the ring for others. This does not mean the minister being entirely neutral on everything as if they have nothing to contribute. This is not the image of polyphony. Nigel Wright argues strongly for

Context (Glasgow: Baptist Union of Scotland, undated), 6; an address by David Coffey quoted in Clive Burnard, *Transformational Servant Leadership as Exemplified in the Ministry of the Reverend Doctor David R. Coffey* (DMin Thesis University of Wales, 2014).

leaders to be proactive because, he writes, it is ‘not good enough for leaders passively to wait for others to take all the initiatives.’²¹ But I don't read anyone arguing for those appointed to offices in the church to be passive. The key question is whether the leadership that ‘leaders’ rightly exercise involves or precludes the whole church from sharing in leadership, whether leadership is restricted or polyphonous.

This will not be simply a managerial approach that prioritises efficiency, nor is it a retreat to democracy so that everyone simply has a voice. Instead, it pushes us to think more deeply about what is happening when the Church gathers. We should certainly see this as much more than decision-making, and it even takes us beyond the idea of discerning, a fuller and richer concept than decision making. There is a deeper sense that what we do in Church Meetings constructs who we are as a church.

Baptist church life prioritises relationships in the community as being of central importance, and these relationships have teleological significance. In other words, holding the ring for others is more than simply discerning answers to particular questions, it is also part of our whole discipleship in which the final goal is our growing into the stature of Christ. Holding the ring for others insists that our growth in discipleship is always part of what is happening including in any discernment or decision-making process. Relationships are not simply utilitarian – necessary for making decisions – but essential; when decisions about buildings and money and even mulled wine are long gone, what remains are relationships through which we find our identity in Christ and in which we grow into the full stature of Christ. This is what we are doing when we hold the ring. Leadership approaches shaped in some way by the ‘great man’ theory categorise some who will always be leaders and others who will always be followers, and thus have a tendency to infantilise others. To hold the ring is to encourage all to share in leadership, prioritise relationships, and take responsibility thus moving towards this teleological maturity. It is fascinating how a developing branch of the much broader category of leadership studies beyond the church has developed

²¹ Wright, *Free Church, Free State*, 160.

theories of 'relational' and 'co-constructed' leadership.²² This is part of what are often called contemporary, rather than classical, perspectives, part of an 'emerging' understanding of leadership in a 'post-heroic' approach. Instead of a focus on the particular traits or skills of individual leaders, 'leadership work is a social process of co-creation' and so 'rather than the person it is the practice that needs to be developed.'²³ Lucia Crevani, one of the writers in this field, asks: do individuals interact with a given situation and then leave that situation the same, having shaped the interactions, or is there any way in which the individuals are also shaped by the social engagement? She suggests the former imagines us growing through independence, the latter through inter-dependence.²⁴ Although written in a 'secular' work, to me this seems theologically right! Further we can offer an even richer account of such inter-dependence based on a teleological and eschatological account of relationships; holding the ring has significant theological depth.

Baptist church life also draws on a proper charismatic ecclesiology, based on texts like 1 Corinthians 12, which offers an account of the gifts given to all carefully positioned between Paul's subversion of the strong by the weak and his appeal to seek the greater gifts of love. The rhetorical function of these passages seems to be to undercut their desire for status as well as an encouragement to give particular space to those that might be thought as weaker.

Stuart and Sian Murray Williams are in effect arguing for such a charismatic ecclesiology in their book *Multi-Voiced Church*, when they talk about the 'expectation that the whole community is gifted, called, empowered and expected to be involved in all aspects of church life.'²⁵ Here is the space for the Spirit to be at work in the church. A charismatic ecclesiology includes within it gifts of leadership and those with such gifts will need to ensure they are enabling and empowering others. This is a rightly subversive leadership which holds the ring,

²² For introductions see A. L. Cunliffe and M. Eriksen, 'Relational Leadership', *Human Relations* 64:11 (2011), 1425-449; Lucia Crevani, 'Relational Leadership' in *Leadership: Contemporary Critical Perspectives* edited by Carroll, Ford and Taylor, 188-211.

²³ Crevani, 'Relational Leadership', 208.

²⁴ Crevani, 'Relational Leadership', 191.

²⁵ Stuart and Sian Murray Williams, *Multi-Voiced Church* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2012), 6.

seeking to help ensure that the gifts of all are valued and developed, that those who might think they have little value and whose voices are marginal are heard clearly by all, and that those who might wish to shout loudest are restrained. But it is not entirely dependent on the leadership of a few or only begins with them — it begins with the work of God’s Spirit who gathers the church and gives gifts to all. This is a polyphonic approach based on inclusive representation. Paul Fiddes, expresses this well when he suggests there should be a creative tension between the way that ‘the few’ and ‘the many’ share in oversight or leadership, this being a particular work of God’s Spirit in the church,

which allows for spiritual oversight (*episkope*) both by the *whole* congregation gathered together in church meeting, and by the minister(s) called to lead the congregation. This oscillating movement between corporate and individual oversight is difficult to pin-down, and can lead to disasters when it begins to swing widely from one side to another, but is based in taking the rule of Christ seriously.²⁶

Such holding the ring is not always easy. At times this will mean being very firm and accepting conflict and ensuring that those with the very loud voices or the most knowledge, who are used to dominating, are not allowed to stifle the leadership of all, so that there is truly space for God to speak in unexpected ways. It will resist the temptation of a simple efficiency as if making decisions is really the most important thing. It will require courage, experience and a deep sensitivity to God. It is the exercise of slow wisdom, in such a way that this changes us.

If first, then, holding the ring is a more appropriate way for the exercise of ministry, in terms of the way that a minister relates to others, the few and the many, a second way we might run with the metaphor, concerns the nature of ministry itself as a distinct calling. I might perceive that my role as minister is to hold the ring for others, but still insist that I am the only one who can hold the ring! There is a significant theological discussion behind this around the necessity of ministry – in traditional terms whether ministers are part of the *esse* of

²⁶ Paul Fiddes, *Doing Theology in a Baptist Way* (Oxford: Whitley, 2000), 22.

the church (and so essential) or given for the *bene esse* of the church (important for the church's flourishing but not essential to its existence.²⁷ But I suspect that the issues here tend to be more driven by personality than theology.

Part of my own realisation is that I don't need to hold the ring so tightly as if somehow it is in my control and without me everything would fall apart. I don't let myself succumb to the fantasy that I am indispensable and without me everything would fall apart. Others will hold the ring too, in the same way that others will be involved in preaching, and leading worship and pastoral care. Others hold the ring too – I don't need to hold it tight – and this will also mean that others hold the ring for me to contribute too. One of the hymns I have gone back to again and again, expressing something of a vision of church I found deeply helpful and challenging, says:

Brother, sister let me serve you.
Let me be as Christ to you.
Pray that I might have the grace
To let you be my servant, too.

I will hold the Christ-light for you
In the night time of your fear.
I will hold my hand out to you;
Speak the peace you long to hear.²⁸

Not all will feel able and have the gifts and skills to hold the ring well so that the leadership of all can be exercised (not all will preach or play music), but I certainly shouldn't feel that it is only me who can do this and feel threatened when others step up. This is to resort again to the zero-sum game. Polyphonous inclusive leadership celebrates all that others have to bring, recognises my need for what others will bring to add to my contribution, on the basis that the result is richer and deeper and fuller.

²⁷ Baptists have normally insisted that ministry is for the *bene esse* of the church; Nigel Wright offers one of the strongest recent accounts, proposing that 'they are almost necessary but not quite absolutely'; see Wright, *Free Church Free State*, 173.

²⁸ © Richard Gillard, *Baptist Praise and Worship 473* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 336.

Am I being naïve and unrealistic? Can this work or do we simply end up with someone dominating in the end? The problem is, of course, our frailty and brokenness; the ways we find too much of our identity in our roles and the way that status feeds our insecurities. It won't be perfect, but it must be possible. I wonder playfully at times whether the eschatological future will be full of leaders and followers. Of course, God will be all in all, and we might say God will be the Leader, but surely when we are all fully grown into the stature of Christ among us there will be no leaders and followers, just a glorious polyphonic inclusiveness.

I began seeking to locate this in the doctrine of God and this is where I end too. Personally, I find not only Cunningham's account of polyphony inspiring, but his whole trinitarian approach compelling. I have been schooled by those who take a relational approach to God as Trinity, and I find this the most helpful theological account. For Cunningham of course there is the perfect polyphony with God, because here there is the most perfect relationships of self-giving. Our calling, though, is not somehow to imitate God in ways that are impossible, but as Paul Fiddes argues to participate in these rhythms of grace so that our lives and our leadership are shaped by our sharing in God's life.²⁹ I suggest that there is real hope and possibility because polyphonic inclusive leadership is possible not because of my ability but ultimately because of the work of the Spirit and God's grace.

Notes on Contributor

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²⁹ This is the whole theme of Paul Fiddes, *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity* (London: DLT, 2000).

Gathering of Gatherings: Where the Local and the Catholic Meet¹

Derek C. Hatch

Throughout their history, Baptists have at times elevated rightly-shaped praxis over clearly articulated conviction. For instance, Stephen Holmes, in discussing Baptist conversations about the sacrament or ordinance of baptism, notes that historically Baptists have been keen to defend the mode of baptism as immersion rather than develop a theology of baptism.² Something similar can be observed in Baptists' historical discussions of the local church. While there has been quite a lot of reflection on and talk about the local church, much of that either has been framed in a defensive posture over against a neighbouring group of Christians (or even other Baptist groups) who seem to be a threat to local church autonomy or has been largely focused on the praxis of local church with less emphasis on a strong theology of the local church. What might it mean for Baptists to theologically embrace the local church? What can it certainly not mean? And how might we discuss the responses to these questions in ways that engage the whole Christian tradition while being grounded within Baptist life and thought? If the concern identified is true, then where can Baptists turn for aid in their time of need? After briefing describing Baptists' understanding of the local church, this article aims to deal with these questions by utilizing a relatively new ecumenical methodology and engaging the work of a Catholic ecclesialist. The result of this exploration will be not only a deeper appreciation for the local church but also a wider set of theological resources for articulating that appreciation within the Baptist tradition.

Baptists and the Local Church

As Baptists emerged from the Separatist movement within the Church of England, they developed a distinct emphasis on the local gathering of believers. Nonetheless, there was still talk of the church outside of

¹ An earlier version of this article was delivered as the 2024 McCandless Lecture at Regent's Park College, Oxford.

² Stephen R. Holmes, *Baptist Theology* (New York: T& T Clark, 2012), 90.

the congregation. Both the Particular Baptist's Second London Confession (1677) and the General Baptist's Orthodox Creed (1678) highlight the church as universal, with Christ as its head, even if attention is eventually turned toward particular congregations (called 'churches').³ Over time, though, calls to return to the "New Testament church" came to be synonymous with becoming a church that did not extend beyond the boundary of the congregation. David Bebbington notes that beginning in the eighteenth century, Baptists on the whole did not do much to emphasize the importance of the church as well as associated topics such as communion, baptism, and ministry. In fact, in contrast to their Christian neighbours, Baptists 'started to assert that it was their honourable achievement to have perceived how marginal [these topics] were to the spiritual life.'⁴

There are several clear examples of this shift. First, the 1833 New Hampshire Confession of Faith stated that 'a visible Church of Christ is a congregation of baptized believers, associated in covenant in the faith and fellowship of the Gospel . . .'⁵ While the confession underscores the importance of the local church, it says nothing about the universal church. Within the American context, individualism and autonomy have become the watchwords. A second notable example is Landmark Baptists, who gained sizeable numbers among Baptists in the U.S. in the mid-nineteenth century (and even maintain a strong hold on the Baptist imagination today). Landmarkers (as they were known) saw the local Baptist church (and only specific local Baptist churches) as true churches in an unbroken line of succession to the apostles.⁶ While they were certainly peculiar, Walter Shurden indicates that there was a seed of mainstream Baptist conviction in their thought (i.e., the centrality of the local church), noting that Landmarkers were 'not so much an innovation as [they were] a perversion by

³ "Second London Confession," chapter XXVI, in *Baptist Confessions of Faith* edited by William L. Lumpkin and Bill J. Leonard (2nd Rev. Ed.; Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2011), 283-89; "Orthodox Creed," Article XXIX, in *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 327.

⁴ David W. Bebbington, *Baptists Through the Centuries: A History of a Global People* (2nd Ed.; Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2018), 185.

⁵ "New Hampshire Confession of Faith," article xiii, in *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 382.

⁶ For more on Landmark Baptists, see James Leo Garrett, *Baptist Theology: A Four-Century Study* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2009), 213-48.

intensification.⁷ It should be acknowledged that the experience of Baptists in the UK is much different than that of most Baptists in the United States (especially in the American South). Various practices and structures (such as the coordination of regional associations and general superintendents before that as well as settlement and sustentation efforts) reveal more connection between local congregations and the possibility of oversight from outside the congregation. As a result, this individualizing tendency is almost certainly more exaggerated among US Baptists, even if it is still evident within the UK context. For instance, the Baptist Union of Great Britain's 'Declaration of Principle,' last revised in 1938, holds that 'each Church has liberty, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to interpret and administer [Jesus'] laws', a statement that has sparked much debate about the shape of church here as well.⁸

The common thread that emerges, then, from most Baptist discussions of the church is the same: for contemporary Baptists (with a few notable exceptions), the church is viewed as only (or at least primarily) the local gathering. Everything beyond its boundaries is a different sort of institution or organization. This is not to say that Baptists have shunned all efforts to cooperate beyond the local congregation. In fact, numerous organizations have been established. Regional associations, state conventions, national conventions and unions, and even a worldwide alliance. Each of these has done important work in supporting local churches, including soliciting answers to difficult questions, shared efforts for education and mission, and even mutual affirmation of ordination candidates. However, despite the ways in which local churches and their congregants might see themselves as inextricably tied to these extracongregational entities, according to their own implicit theology (and sometimes their explicit convictions as well), they were not churches (or church). Thus, as Holmes writes,

⁷ Walter B. Shurden, *Not an Easy Journey: Some Transitions in Baptist Life* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2005), 95.

⁸ See Richard Kidd (ed.), *Something to Declare: A Study of the Declaration of Principle* (Didcot: Baptist Union, 1996). This aimed at providing more conversation around the Declaration and how it might best shape life for Baptists in the Union. In short, centring on the theme of covenant, they argue that the basis for the BUGB is theological rather than pragmatic. For more on the statement and the mixed response it received, see Andy Goodliff, *Renewing a Modern Denomination: A Study of Baptist Institutional Life in the 1990s* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2021), 120-23.

‘There is no “Baptist church” that is not a local congregation: associations, conventions and unions are just that – associations and conventions and unions of local churches.’⁹

Where does this leave Baptists in considering the ecclesial relationship between local congregations? That is, if I am a member of one local Baptist congregation, how can I affirm (or can I affirm) the churchness of a different local Baptist congregation? If we get past that question, what do we call ourselves – churches or simply church? Moreover, what does it mean for Baptists to see themselves as part of a wider church (the church universal or the church catholic)? This is a particularly difficult question since so much of what Baptists have said about the local church is set in opposition to anything outside of it.¹⁰ To provide some insight into answering these questions, attention needs to be given to a recent development in ecumenical studies before engaging with a non-Baptist conversation partner.

Receptive Ecumenism as Path Forward

In the wake of perceived stagnation in ecumenical progress, oft-mentioned descriptions of a long ecumenical winter, and a sense of unrealism at the articulated ecumenical goal of structural unity, a shift in ecumenical approach was necessary.¹¹ Building on the earlier work of ecumenical encounter through striving together for shared witness and intentional dialogue, receptive ecumenism seeks to embrace this while also looking for ways to embody wider moments of exchange and deeper relationships. To do this, receptive ecumenism looks for ‘long-term mutual challenge, development, and growth by bringing the traditions into encounter with each other precisely in their difference.’¹²

⁹ Holmes, *Baptist Theology*, 97.

¹⁰ Holmes asks a similar question: ‘If each local congregation governs itself, without intervention from the wider church, how can Baptist churches reflect the riches of whatever broader Christian church they recognize’, Holmes, *Baptist Theology*, 104.

¹¹ Paul D. Murray, ‘Receptive Ecumenism and Catholic Learning – Establishing the Agenda’ in *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning: Exploring a Way for Contemporary Ecumenism* edited by Paul D. Murray (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 9-10.

¹² Paul D. Murray, ‘Introducing Receptive Ecumenism’, *The Ecumenist* 51.2 (Spring 2014): 3.

While earlier ecumenical work focused attention on placing different groups in conversation or in shared work (noting that their being in proximity to one another was itself a form of ecumenical progress), receptive ecumenism focuses on the stance of those in such encounters. That is, previously someone entering such work was prepared to represent one's own tradition, possibly even educating the ecumenical other concerning that Christian group. In this mode, Baptists would attempt to tell Catholics what they needed to know about Baptists, and the focal question was, 'What do others need to know about us?' Some of this work, especially the bilateral dialogues that embraced a "differentiated consensus" model, was quite beneficial, often clarifying the distinctions between various Christian groups (e.g., what is the difference between Baptists and Catholics concerning the Virgin Mary?) or even helping ecumenical others understand the nuances within a given denomination or region (e.g., comprehending the history of and differences between all of the Baptist groups in the United States). Even at its best, though, this approach involved managing and even defending the boundaries between traditions, often reinforcing differences rather than creating openings for exchange.

By contrast, receptive ecumenism takes seriously the difference between the ecumenical partners, but reframes one's stance to those differences by asking, 'What is it that *we* need to learn and can learn, or receive, with integrity from our others?'¹³ One trailblazer in this approach, Paul Murray, adds that this question is asked 'without insisting, although certainly hoping, that these other traditions are also asking themselves the same question.'¹⁴ The ultimate goal is the cultivation of 'the way of hope-filled conversion.'¹⁵ In a practical way, this approach recognizes not only the gifts that other traditions may be able to share, but also soberly sees the limitations of each tradition and its respective inability to resolve them on its own. That is, Baptists have theological and ecclesiological needs and questions that they are incapable of answering solely from their own resources (or at least from their own present understanding of those resources). This drives all Christian groups to the wider Christian tradition – to share, to

¹³ Murray, 'Introducing Receptive Ecumenism', 1.

¹⁴ Murray, 'Receptive Ecumenism and Catholic Learning', 12.

¹⁵ Murray, 'Receptive Ecumenism and Catholic Learning', 12.

listen, and to learn. This receptive ecumenical approach, then, has real promise for progress toward Christian unity, but only as what Murray calls ‘an ecumenism of wounded hands.’¹⁶

In many ways, receptive ecumenism has always been at the heart of the most faithful forms of ecumenical thinking and practice. Murray is adamant that it is not a ‘second-best’ option in light of present circumstances (that previously-mentioned ‘ecumenical winter’), as though we are giving up on the full hope of visible church unity. Instead, he states that, through receptive ecumenism,

the situation in which we now find ourselves can begin to appear less as a problematic interim before the urgent striving for attainable structural unity can get back on track and more as a long-term learning opportunity in which churches might progress towards their calling and destiny in the only way possible – by slow and difficult growth in maturity.¹⁷

He also highlights the importance of each tradition engaging in the ecumenical encounter *with integrity*. In other words, the goal is not to ask how one can abandon their own tradition for another. Rather, one’s appreciation of gifts and insights from another tradition is precisely predicated on one’s own location within a particular Christian group. As Murray writes, it focuses on ‘the desire to become more fully, more freely, and more richly what we already are through the expansion of possibilities that relationship brings.’¹⁸ He continues: ‘From the Roman Catholic perspective, for example, this... is not a matter of becoming *less* Catholic but of becoming *more* Catholic precisely by becoming more appropriately Anglican, more appropriately Lutheran, more appropriately Methodist, more appropriately Orthodox, etc.’¹⁹

¹⁶ Murray, ‘Introducing Receptive Ecumenism,’ 5. This ecumenism is one ‘of being prepared to show our wounds to each other, knowing that we cannot heal or save ourselves; knowing that we need to be ministered to in our need from another’s gift and grace; and trusting that as in the Risen Lord in whose ecclesial body these wounds exist, they can become sites of our redemption, jewels of transformed ecclesial existence’, 5.

¹⁷ Murray, ‘Receptive Ecumenism and Catholic Learning’, 15.

¹⁸ Murray, ‘Receptive Ecumenism and Catholic Learning’, 15-16.

¹⁹ Murray, ‘Receptive Ecumenism and Catholic Learning’, 16.

Receptive ecumenism can chart a course for a conversation about the local church. If Baptists struggle to understand the depth of relations between the local and the universal or even to articulate a theology of the local church, then perhaps they need to receive ecclesiological and theological gifts from their non-Baptist brothers and sisters in Christ that can help them respond to their needs.

Communion Ecclesiology

Communion ecclesiology developed in the mid-twentieth century as an approach to ecclesiology that did not privilege juridical or institutional descriptions of the church. Instead, aspects of the church that are more directly theological were emphasized, such as Trinitarian relations, the church as the mystical body of Christ, and the relation of the sacraments to the life of the church. Because communion ecclesiology has resonated with Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant thinkers, it is actually quite diverse in itself.²⁰ Nonetheless, Dennis Doyle has helpfully identified four shared themes. First is a retrieval of a vision of the church from Christianity's first millennium (i.e., prior to the East/West split in 1054). Second, communion ecclesiology highlights a 'spiritual fellowship or communion between human beings and God.'²¹ Third is a focus on visible unity through shared participation in the Eucharist, and fourth is 'a dynamic and healthy interplay between unity and diversity in the Church, between the Church universal and the local churches.'²²

For the Roman Catholic Church, communion ecclesiology's jumping-off point has been descriptions of the church that appeared in the Second Vatican Council. *Lumen Gentium* (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church), quoting from Cyprian, discusses the universal church as a people who are united by the unity of the Trinitarian persons.²³ Likewise, the visible institutional church and the mystical body of

²⁰ Dennis Doyle identifies six *Catholic* versions of communion ecclesiology. See Dennis M. Doyle, *Communion Ecclesiology* (Orbis, 2000), 19-20.

²¹ Doyle, *Communion Ecclesiology*, 13.

²² Doyle, *Communion Ecclesiology*, 13.

²³ Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium* (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church), November 21, 1964, available at https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html, §4.

Christ are not separated from one another, but instead, “form one complex reality which comes together from a human and a divine element.”²⁴ Throughout the text, the focal images for the church are as the people of God and as a pilgrim church.²⁵ Of course, *Lumen Gentium* is also famous for stating that the Church of Christ subsists, but is not coterminous with, the Catholic Church, providing theological and ecclesial space for non-Catholics.²⁶ Similarly, *Gaudium et Spes* (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World) extended the horizon for understanding the nature of the church by discussing human beings as inherently social creatures and with the church serving as leaven in the world.²⁷

In *The Word of God in the Life of the Church*, the report from the second international ecumenical dialogue between the Baptist World Alliance and the Roman Catholic Church, communion ecclesiology was a significant piece of the commission’s ecclesiological reflections, with both the Catholic and Baptist delegations affirming that

The church is . . . to be understood as a *koinonia* (‘communion,’ ‘participation,’ or ‘fellowship’), which is grounded in the *koinonia* of the triune God . . . While the phrase ‘communion ecclesiology’ is relatively recent, and is more frequently used by Catholic theologians than by Baptist ones, we both recognize it as expressing the heart of the nature of the church.²⁸

²⁴ Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, §8.

²⁵ For ‘people of God,’ see Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, §§9-17; for ‘pilgrim church,’ see Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, §§48-51.

²⁶ ‘[T]he one Church of Christ . . . subsists in the Catholic Church, which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the Bishops in communion with him, although many elements of sanctification and of truth are found outside of its visible structure’ (Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, §8).

²⁷ Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes* (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World), December 7, 1965, available at https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html, §§12, 40.

²⁸ Baptist World Alliance and Catholic Church, *The Word of God in the Life of the Church*, available at <https://baptistworld.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Baptist-Catholic-Dialogue-Phase-II.pdf>, §11.

The ecumenical dialogue commission distilled the differences between Baptists and Catholics concerning how this affirmation is manifested within each tradition, but one additional and significant insight was added.

Early Baptist churches described themselves as covenanted to follow the Lord's ways and covenanted to walk together as a community.²⁹ By shining a light on a vertical dimension of covenant that linked together the individual believer and God as well as a horizontal dimension of covenant that tied together all gathered Christians, covenant theology prompted a more robust notion of salvation and the journey of the Christian life for Baptists. In *The Word of God in the Life of the Church*, this covenant ecclesiology was linked with communion ecclesiology and extended from the dual relationships of the believer and God and the local gathering of believers among themselves to include extracongregational gatherings such as associations and unions.³⁰ This connection provides an opening for more exploration of communion ecclesiology and the gifts it may offer to Baptist thinking on the local church. To deepen this conversation, the work of Jean-Marie Tillard offers precisely the resources for Baptists to cultivate a deeper sense of the local, one that embraces the importance of the local while bringing it into contact with the whole church.

The Ecclesiology of Jean-Marie Tillard

Jean-Marie Roger Tillard, a French Dominican ecclesialogist with deep Canadian roots, stands in a unique place before, during, and after the Second Vatican Council. Influenced by the earlier work of fellow Dominicans Yves Congar and Marie-Dominique Chenu, Tillard found himself at a crossroads concerning reflection on the nature of the church (both within Catholicism and between the Catholic Church and other Christian pilgrims separated from it). Before his death in 2000, Tillard's ecumenical vision was honed in dialogues with the Faith and Order commission of the World Council of Churches, the Disciples of Christ, the Anglican Communion (both internationally and in Canada),

²⁹ See Paul S. Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2003), 21-47.

³⁰ Baptist World Alliance and Catholic Church, *The Word of God in the Life of the Church*, §17.

and the Orthodox.³¹ Of particular interest to Tillard was the relationship between the universal church and the local church. Four major works constitute Tillard's version of communion ecclesiology, all originally published in French: *The Bishop of Rome* (1982), *Church of Churches* (1987), *Flesh of the Church, Flesh of Christ* (1992), and *The Local Church* (1996).

To unfold his theology of the local church, it is necessary to discuss the Jerusalem church, specifically on the Day of Pentecost. It is somewhat customary to declare that Pentecost is the 'birthday of the church.' While Tillard at times demurs from such a declaration, he does say that it is the 'origin of the church . . . at least as the epiphany of its nature.'³² Like the appearance of YHWH at Sinai, Pentecost gathers together the people of God into a communal entity, 'dominat[ing] and condition[ing] the vision of the church that gradually will be integrated into the Christian consciousness.'³³ This link with the Hebrew Bible is important for Tillard. In fact, he underscores the fact that *ekklesia* is used by the Septuagint as the translation of the Hebrew *Qahal*, what he describes as 'the gathering of the believing People, called together by God.'³⁴ By placing Pentecost and Sinai in continuity, Tillard is able to say that '[t]he Church of Pentecost "fulfils" the vow of the theophany on Sinai.'³⁵ Moreover, like the covenant event at Sinai, the grace poured out at Pentecost is once-for-all (*ephapax*), a specific local event that casts ripples across the entire history of the universal church.

In his discussion of the dynamics of Pentecost, Tillard identifies three essential elements at the heart of the church that emerge in that moment: the descent of the Holy Spirit, apostolic witness, and communion. The Book of Acts describes the ongoing life of the church as carrying these three elements forward (cf. Acts 2:42-47). In

³¹ For more biographical information about Tillard, see Brian P. Flanagan, *Communion, Diversity, and Salvation: The Contribution of Jean-Marie Tillard to Systematic Ecclesiology* (New York: T & T Clark, 2011), 49-53 and Christopher Ruddy, *The Local Church: Tillard and the Future of Catholic Ecclesiology* (New York: Crossroad, 2006), 4-6.

³² J.-M. R. Tillard, O.P., *Church of Churches: The Ecclesiology of Communion*, R. C. De Peaux, O. Praem., trans. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), 3.

³³ Tillard, *Church of Churches*, 3.

³⁴ Tillard, *Church of Churches*, 84.

³⁵ Tillard, *Church of Churches*, 11.

particular, concerning communion, Tillard, following the insights of several early church fathers, sees an inversion of Babel in the Pentecostal event. In Genesis 11, peoples are scattered due to the confusion of their shared language, while in Jerusalem, peoples are gathered together despite speaking different tongues. As such, this inversion centres on the relation of unity and difference: ‘At Babel only one language, symbol of a vibrant unity, is shattered by proud human intention. On the feast of Pentecost the diversity of languages, symbol of the barrier which has grown up among peoples, is unified in the common understanding of the apostolic Word.’³⁶ As can be seen, the unity found here does not eliminate difference but draws the church together precisely through its differences, creating a unity-in-diversity. According to Tillard, the church, in the end, exists as a ‘communion of differences.’³⁷

Tillard’s attention to the Jerusalem church extends further, however, because he is adamant that the Jerusalem church is a local church. This may seem like something to be taken for granted until one reflects on Tillard’s own Roman Catholic tradition, where the emphasis is placed on the universal church (at times, even according to Tillard, over against the local). Through this Roman Catholic set of lenses, it is easier to see the Jerusalem church as the universal church. Moreover, once the universal church looms large over this ecclesial landscape, other local churches are more easily identified as *parts* of the universal. Therefore, for Tillard, it is important to maintain that the Jerusalem church on Pentecost is a *local* church. In a manner that will feel familiar to many Baptists, with the Jerusalem church identified as local church, its members gather together to discern the way of Christ and live by the Spirit in their local context.

Here it is important to describe a distinction that Tillard makes between the particular and the local. The particular, as the word etymologically suggests, is a component of a whole. In that sense, all particulars constitute the whole. The local, however, can be the whole while also being situated in a specific place (i.e., located). Further, the local is embedded in and interacts with ‘the cultures, geographies, and

³⁶ Tillard, *Church of Churches*, 8.

³⁷ J.-M. R. Tillard, O.P., *Chair de l’Église, chair du Christ: Aux sources de l’écclésiologie de communion* (Paris: Cerf, 1992), cited in Ruddy, *The Local Church*, 185n23.

histories – in short, the humanity – of its surroundings.³⁸ Thus, despite the tendency for pastors and scholars (and even the texts of Vatican II) to use ‘particular’ and ‘local’ somewhat interchangeably, the differences between the two are theologically important, especially for the early church. As Christopher Ruddy writes of Tillard: ‘the Jerusalem church is not a mere part of a larger, universal whole, but rather is a genuinely local church, manifesting the fullness of the *ephapax* [“once-for-all”] grace of Pentecost in and through a given place’s history and culture, a place that is, in fact, at the center of salvation history.’³⁹

Communion as *koinonia* stands as a central concept for Tillard’s ecclesiology, encapsulating not only the nature of the church, but also the relationship between local congregations. Indeed, communion resides at the heart of the one and the many. There are many churches scattered across space and time, but there is also only one church. As such, the communion between local Christian communities does not function in an additive fashion. Instead, each congregation shares in the same communion found in the church at Pentecost—that is, ‘entry into complete participation in a full and definitive (already eschatological) gift from God.’⁴⁰ By focusing on communion among such difference, Tillard is presented the challenge of how Christians can be truly one and catholic. In other words, in a world where diversity is manifested in language, culture, practice, ritual, nationality, and ethnicity, how can I know that a gathered communion across the street is church and even ‘go on’ together as church? For Tillard, ‘no local church can regard its “difference” as the supreme value in terms of which everything in it must be judged.’⁴¹ This means that a local church must have porous boundaries and ‘cannot reduce the Church of God to itself.’⁴² In short, ‘all ecclesial self-sufficiency is excluded,’⁴³ local churches must remain always open to helping and being helped by other churches.⁴⁴ Thus, while local churches are distinct from one

³⁸ Ruddy, *The Local Church*, 7.

³⁹ Ruddy, *The Local Church*, 59.

⁴⁰ J.-M. R. Tillard, *L’Eglise locale: Ecclésiologie de communion et catholicité*, 41; cited in Ruddy, *The Local Church*, 186n26.

⁴¹ Tillard, ‘The Local Church within Catholicity’, *The Jurist* 52 (1992): 452-53.

⁴² Tillard, ‘The Local Church within Catholicity’, 453.

⁴³ Ruddy, *The Local Church*, 97.

⁴⁴ Tillard, *L’Eglise locale*, 380; cited in Ruddy, *The Local Church*, 97.

another, they cannot be separated. In this paradigm, then, recognition becomes a crucial task for moving forward, local churches seeing in their neighboring local churches and other ecclesial structures the signs of the church of God—signs of ‘what the Spirit of God caused to be born in the local church of Jerusalem.’⁴⁵ Recognition even works at an intercontextual level as Tillard says that this process is what ‘permits a Parisian to *re-cognize* his own Eucharist in the Sunday celebration of a Maronite community, for a parishioner from Warsaw to *re-cognize* his own evangelical conviction in the preaching in a basic Brazilian community, for an adult to *re-cognize* his own faith in the catechesis of his young child.’⁴⁶ Such mutual recognition, Tillard notes, is ‘the concrete fabric of *koinonia*.’⁴⁷ By seeking this sort of recognition, the church truly becomes ‘a *communion* of local Churches.’⁴⁸

Tillard’s ecclesiology embraces the traditional four marks of the church: unity, holiness, apostolicity, and catholicity. However, his distinct emphasis on the local, exemplified by the Jerusalem church, nuances each in particular ways. The oneness of the church is grounded in the ‘integrity of God’s gift’ and the local church ‘already possesses the entirety of the church.’⁴⁹ While this unity is not manifested in uniformity, the divided character of the church does prompt an eschatological hope for full and visible unity.⁵⁰ Tillard describes the church’s holiness as primarily theological and then ethical. That is, 1 Peter 1:15-16, the church’s sanctity consists of participating in the God who is holy. Ethical living flows from this wellspring.⁵¹ At the same time, like all the marks of the church, holiness is both a gift and a task, one that is embodied in lived local experience. The apostolic character of the church is witnessed in its memory of what God has done in Jesus Christ. That memory, though,

⁴⁵ Tillard, ‘The Local Church within Catholicity’, 453.

⁴⁶ Tillard, *Church of Churches*, 224.

⁴⁷ Tillard, ‘The Local Church within Catholicity’, 453.

⁴⁸ Tillard, *Church of Churches*, 114.

⁴⁹ Ruddy, *The Local Church*, 61.

⁵⁰ Ruddy, *The Local Church*, 62-63.

⁵¹ This should not give the impression that Tillard has a triumphant notion of the church’s life, such that all of the church’s ethical judgments are pure, accurate, and sound. Indeed, in later writings, he describes the church as pilgrim and wandering, highlighting the eschatological tension between the present state of the church and its future destiny. See J.-M. R. Tillard, *The Eucharist: Pasch of God’s People*, Dennis L. Wienk, trans. (Staten Island, NY: Alba House, 1967), 199, 278.

does not reside in the past. Indeed, as the grace of Pentecost was once-for-all (*ephapax*), the church now shares in the apostolic church. That remembrance is reenacted at each local Eucharistic action.⁵²

Finally, Tillard is adamant that catholicity cannot be conceived as quantitative or geographical: ‘The Church is not catholic simply because it is called to expand throughout all the earth or because it is established through the summation of all the communities assembled in the communion of one faith, one baptism, one Eucharist.’⁵³ Instead, the catholicity of the church refers to ‘the entirety of the plan of God for His People, at the end of a long journey through the centuries of history.’⁵⁴ This plan is received by the Jerusalem church at Pentecost and is inculturated there. Like the Jerusalem church, all local churches are catholic as well. In each community the same wholeness is manifested within diverse cultures and places. Like communion, catholicity does not follow the logic of addition. As new communities of Christians are founded, they share in the full grace granted to the Jerusalem church, but they do not add anything to the whole church or its catholicity.⁵⁵ In fact, Tillard declares that ‘even when it was only the community at Jerusalem, the Pentecostal church was already fully the catholic Church of God.’⁵⁶

Tillard’s qualitative conception of catholicity reframes the relationship between the local and universal. Previously, the focus was on the tension between the two – a push-and-pull centring on questions of authority and ecclesiality (this sort of dynamic has been present in many Christian communions). At its worst, a zero-sum game could emerge between the local church and the universal church. Through Tillard’s conception of catholicity, though, rather than the catholic and the local standing at odds with one another, the church is catholic *because it is local*. Tillard, by focusing on the Jerusalem church as both

⁵² Ruddy, *The Local Church*, 74.

⁵³ Jean-Marie Tillard, ‘Corps du Christ et Esprit Saint: Les exigences de la communion’, *Irenikon* 63 (1990): 182; cited in Flanagan, *Communion, Diversity, and Salvation*, 76.

⁵⁴ Tillard, ‘The Local Church within Catholicity’, 449.

⁵⁵ ‘When a new church is founded, it cannot be said that the Church of God becomes more catholic; catholicity is actualized when salvation is incarnated in a new human place where faith, *κοινωνία*, the Eucharist, solidarity, the mission of all the churches of God are found’, Tillard, ‘The Local Church within Catholicity’, 451.

⁵⁶ Tillard, ‘The Local Church within Catholicity’, 449.

local and catholic, dynamically holds both together: ‘There will be no more catholicity in the gathering of local Churches ‘scattered throughout the world’ than was present in the single local Church of Jerusalem.’⁵⁷ This dynamic relationship also reshapes how the church is understood such that ‘[t]he church of Jerusalem, while *fully* the church of God, is not the *whole* church of God,’⁵⁸ and at the same time, ‘There is no Church universal that is not also to be found inculturated in local churches.’⁵⁹

With an emphasis on the localized practice of the church, it is not surprising that sacraments reside at the heart of Tillard’s thinking, especially since part of his ecumenical work involved the reception of the Faith and Order convergence text *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*. For Tillard, baptism is a sacrament of faith, and he even notes that faith is a necessary condition of baptism, doing so in a way that, according to Ruddy, emphasizes the believer’s ‘free acceptance of the church’s faith.’⁶⁰ Baptism is foundational to the church’s unity, establishing equality between believers. In the liturgy of the eucharist, Tillard finds ‘the normative expression par excellence of the local church, the Church of God in *such* a place.’⁶¹ In short, in the eucharist, the church is what it does. The shared nature of the eucharist across multiple communions has a centripetal quality, drawing diverse peoples together: ‘In gathering as the baptized around the eucharistic table with its bishop (or his presbyter), the local church fully expresses its

⁵⁷ ‘There will be no more catholicity in the gathering of local Churches ‘scattered throughout the world’ than was present in the single local Church of Jerusalem’, Tillard, ‘The Local Church within Catholicity’, 450.

⁵⁸ Ruddy, *The Local Church*, 69. There are distinct echoes of Tillard’s thinking in particular sections of the latest Faith & Order convergence text, *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, especially concerning the relationship between local churches and the universal church. Lines like ‘Each local church contains within it the fullness of what it is to be the Church. It is wholly Church, but not the whole Church’ (§31) and descriptions of the church as a communion of local churches highlight the importance of Tillard’s ecclesiology to the global ecumenical movement. See World Council of Churches, *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, Faith and Order Paper No. 214 (Geneva: WCC, 2013), available at https://www.oikoumene.org/sites/default/files/Document/The_Church_Towards_a_common_vision.pdf.

⁵⁹ Doyle, *Communion Ecclesiology*, 154.

⁶⁰ Ruddy, *The Local Church*, 87.

⁶¹ Tillard, *L’Eglise locale*, 263; cited in Ruddy, *The Local Church*, 205n128.

communion with God, humanity, and creation.⁶² However, while the eucharistic liturgy links all local churches together, there is also a centrifugal force that grounds each local community in their place. That is, the located character of the eucharist allows the gathered community to highlight the differences that are joined together at the eucharistic table and then sent out to be in the world that they have together consumed: the body of Christ. As such, each local community's actions after the liturgy also reflect the differences that mark each local community and the work that each context requires of those communities.

What Can Baptists Learn?

One way to follow this exposition of Tillard's thinking on the local church would be to focus on the places where he seems to tilt toward Baptist thinking. These do exist. For instance, Dennis Doyle remarks on how Tillard's always-inculturated character of the church universal within the church local allows him to affirm aspects of free church theology, such as 'the constitutive role of the local church.'⁶³ Baptists might even celebrate a bit ('See, even the Catholics are recognizing that we are right on this.'). Alternatively, we might spotlight the remaining differences between Tillard's conception of the church and various Baptist versions. For instance, Tillard, even though he criticizes titular sees (i.e., dioceses that no longer functional exist within the Catholic Church), retains a significant role for the episcopacy and even the papacy within his theology of the local church. Moreover, his communion ecclesiology is built on the Catholic understanding of the local, which centres on the diocese led by the bishop rather than the parish led by the priest (the latter of which would be more analogous to a Baptist notion of the local church as grounded in the gathered congregation). However, to move down either of these paths would depart from the earlier commitment to receptive ecumenism. As a reminder, the question is not, What do Catholics need to learn (or have learned) from Baptists? or How are Baptists different from Catholics? Instead, it is, What can Baptists receive with integrity from Catholic communion ecclesiology more broadly and Tillard's version of it in particular? Along this path, four key insights deserve attention.

⁶² Ruddy, *The Local Church*, 90.

⁶³ Doyle, *Communion Ecclesiology*, 154.

First, Tillard's vision of the local church recognizes the church outside the local congregation, that is, in bodies and structures that are not congregations. For Catholics, this looks like the diocese beyond the boundaries of the parish as well as synods of bishops beyond the diocese. Each is not only derived from the local (which is important for Tillard), but also embodies the church. As mentioned earlier, Baptists have had the practice of forming cooperative endeavors that exist outside the local congregation. However, as John Colwell writes of his own British context, 'Too often in practice . . . denominational committees and councils have been perceived as institutional and organizational rather than ecclesial and, increasingly over recent years, assemblies (both of Associations and the Union) have become more celebratory than ecclesially deliberative.'⁶⁴ While Colwell's comments directly concern the Baptist Union of Great Britain, they are apt commentary on Baptists in the United States as well. Even if cooperative efforts are seen as essential to the work of the church, they are not understood to be church in themselves.

For Baptists to receive this gift from Tillard would mean recognizing the ecclesiality of other congregations but also the ecclesiality of extracongregational structures such as associations, unions, and conventions. Even the Baptist World Alliance might be conceived as retaining a sense of church-ness. These cooperative endeavours—which Baptists already describe as helpful for local churches to accomplish their mission—would gain a deeper significance and theological weight. Such an understanding of extracongregational organizations has some distinct resonance with Paul Fiddes's suggestion that covenant ecclesiology places the local congregation in relation with external organizations such as associations and unions.⁶⁵ For Fiddes, this is centred on the 'rule of Christ':

Because Christ rules in the local congregation, the congregation has a liberty that cannot be infringed by any external ecclesial power. . . . Since Christ also rules in assemblies of churches when they gather, the local church meeting *must* give serious attention to the way that this wider

⁶⁴ John Colwell, 'Integrity and Relatedness: Some Critical Reflections on Congregationalism and Connexionalism', *Baptist Quarterly* 48.1 (2017): 20.

⁶⁵ See Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces*, 43-45.

association has discerned the mind of Christ, to be ready to trust fellow churches, and to have good reason if it is to challenge their proposals.⁶⁶

In this manner, the theological category of ‘church’ would expand for Baptists beyond the local while still extending from the local.

Second, for Baptists to receive Tillard’s ecclesiological vision with integrity would mean a reconfiguration of the local. Tillard’s emphasis on the local church grounds it in particular contexts and cultures. As Ruddy states, the church is ‘to sink its roots into the “fleshly earth” and draw sustenance from it.’⁶⁷ That is, local churches are unavoidably shaped by their locations, both in who they are and in what they do. This is where catholicity resides for Tillard. Or as Stanley Hauerwas notes, ‘[T]he catholicity of the church is necessarily local,’ with local at least meaning that ‘claims of unity begin with the concrete life of actual congregations.’⁶⁸

Baptists, despite their emphasis on the local church, can occasionally make ‘local church’ into an abstraction that prevents genuine attention to the particular contextual details of a given place. Instead, as Fiddes writes, ‘the local church is a community which gathers together a whole range of people, cutting across barriers of age, class, culture and temperament . . . Its strength comes from being a gathering of the “unlike”.’⁶⁹ Like Tillard, Fiddes takes seriously the difference encountered within the local church, but not as an obstacle to unity. The local needs to be attended in all of its complexity, messiness, and wonder. To do this would provide what John Inscore Essick and Mark Medley describe as ‘a fresh understanding of the local, which may be capable of resisting and countering parochial and individualistic dangers latent in Baptist ecclesiology.’⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Paul S. Fiddes, ‘Covenanting Churches,’ 37 in *Seeds of the Church: Towards an Ecumenical Baptist Ecclesiology*, edited by Teun van der Leer, Henk Bakker, Steven R. Harmon and Elizabeth Newman (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2022).

⁶⁷ Ruddy, *The Local Church*, 59.

⁶⁸ Stanley Hauerwas, ‘Which Church? What Unity? Or, An Attempt to Say What I May Think About the Future of Christian Unity,’ *Pro Ecclesia* 22.3 (2013): 273.

⁶⁹ Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces*, 254.

⁷⁰ John Inscore Essick and Mark S. Medley, ‘Local Catholicity: The Bodies and Places Where Jesus Is (Found),’ *Review & Expositor* 112.1 (February 2015): 53.

Third, Tillard's emphasis on the local as communion, and the wider church as a communion of communions, is instructive for Baptists. In many ways, this is ground that has been traveled by earlier Baptist covenant ecclesiology. However, the linkage between the two approaches may further develop Baptists' own ecclesiological resources and reflection. The covenantal relationship centers on the people gathered together in one place and committed to participation in the worship and service of this one community. This community is gathered by God, not to be a solitary enclave, but to share in the wider people known as *ekklesia*—the people whom God has called forth across space and time (an *ekklesia* that Tillard recognizes as gathered). As such, if a Baptist congregation might be best conceived as a gathering and a gathered one, then the catholicity of the church might be best described as a 'Gathering of Gatherings.'

Fourth, Tillard's notion of the local church is not developed over against the universal or catholic church. Inspired by these insights, Baptists might recognize the catholic as present within the local. Moreover, the divine commission of the *ekklesia*, which is sometimes diminished within Baptist ecclesiology since it can easily elevate the place of the universal, is maintained as well. That is, Baptists can boldly declare that the church is established by God and not simply a human creation. To do so, it might be helpful to take a clue from Tillard's ecclesiology.

To truly receive this gift from Tillard's ecclesiology will likely require some rethinking of the relationship between a local congregation and its neighbours. Often using terms such as 'autonomy' and 'independence,' the focus has been the liberty of the local congregation at the expense of everything apart from the local. However, if the local is always already catholic, then there is no zero-sum game between them. Moreover, something is lost when the local is not seen in a dynamic relationship with the catholic. Catholicity, then, leads to a different notion of liberty, as John Colwell suggests: 'If a local church is to be recognized as church its liberty must be bounded by a commitment to catholicity.'⁷¹

⁷¹ Colwell, 'Integrity and Relatedness', 16.

Conclusion

In 2017, former Baptist World Alliance General Secretary and Jamaican Baptist theologian Neville Callam remarked that there was an opportunity for global Baptists to ‘affirm a communion ecclesiology that honors historic Baptist emphases.’⁷² He stated that the BWA, while not an overseeing or supervisory body over churches or conventions and unions, was more than simply an affinity group or ‘a voluntary association of people claiming to share a common heritage.’⁷³ Instead, Callam described the BWA as ‘a fellowship or communion of churches’ with an ‘ecclesial density.’⁷⁴ What might this ecclesiology look like? Through Tillard’s work, Baptists who love and value the gathered local church are challenged to see that gathering as participating in the larger gathering of God across space and time. This ‘Gathering of Gatherings’ does not set the local over against the universal, and it has profound implications for intra-Baptist relations and ecumenical conversations.

In the rabbinical Jewish tradition, Pentecost (or Shavuot) marked a time to remember the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai. This was an occasion that served as something of a covenant renewal. Stemming from Tillard’s emphasis on the church at Pentecost, Baptists might see Pentecost as an opportunity to reconsider the nature of the local church. This will require giving deeper attention to the contours of our local contexts (what Tillard calls the ‘fleshy earth’), which will also necessitate seeing a wider horizon for what is church. In truth, embracing the church as a ‘Gathering of Gatherings’ is a summons to recover a sense of the pilgrim church. In this way, Baptists can become

⁷² Ken Camp, ‘BWA Leader emphasizes “essential oneness” of Christian world communion’, *Baptist Standard*, March 29, 2017, available at <https://www.baptiststandard.com/news/texas/bwa-leader-emphasizes-essential-oneness-of-christian-world-communion/>

⁷³ ‘Baptist World Alliance has deep “ecclesial density,”’ www.baptistworld.org/news/bwa-has-deep-ecclesial-density; for more on Callam discussing the ecclesiological significance of the BWA, see Neville Callam, ‘A Word from . . .’, *Review and Expositor* 111.4 (2014): 317-19.

⁷⁴ BWA Communications, ‘Baptist World Alliance has deep “ecclesial density,”’ available at <https://www.baptistworld.org/news/bwa-has-deep-ecclesial-density>. For full lecture, see https://mediaspace.baylor.edu/media/Dr.+Neville+Callam+-+%22The+Case+of+the+Baptist+World+Alliance%22/0_q1z3mshn/39060762.

more Baptist in their understanding of the local church, even if they do so by carefully listening to the work of a Catholic ecclesiologist.

Note on Contributor

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Helen Paynter — Director, Centre for Bible and Violence, Bristol
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Joshua Searle — Professor of Missiology and Intercultural Theology,
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Lina Toth — Assistant Principal and Lecturer in Practical Theology,
Scottish Baptist College

Aims

- To encourage the sharing of good theological, biblical and historical research by Baptists
- To support pastor–theologians in academic publishing
- To offer the wider Baptist family thoughtful work which will aid their life and mission

Submitting to Journal of Baptist Theology

We welcome submissions from Baptist pastor–theologians. All submissions to be emailed to Andy Goodliff (andy@goodliff.com) as Word documents with footnotes. Submissions to be no more than 7,000 words.

Cover Image

Designed by Micky Munroe. The image is based on a painting that was for many years displayed in Helwys Hall, Regent’s Park College, Oxford and was designed by Henry Wheeler Robinson (College Principal, 1920-44), representing the five principles of Baptist life: faith, baptism, evangelism, fellowship and freedom. See H. Wheeler Robinson, ‘The Five Points of a Baptist’s Faith’ *Baptist Quarterly* 11.2-2 (January-April 1942), 4–14.