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# Slow wisdom: Listening and discernment at the Church Meeting

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## 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 hooks<sup>1</sup> and discernment models used at the World Council of Churches.<sup>2</sup> I argue that churches can host radical Church Meetings as Stephen Holmes<sup>3</sup> 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.

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<sup>1</sup> bell hooks, *Teaching to transgress – Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>2</sup> 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).

<sup>3</sup> 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 White<sup>4</sup> 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?

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<sup>4</sup>I 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.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, it was Charles Spurgeon who planted<sup>6</sup> 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,<sup>7</sup> 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

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<sup>5</sup> Brian Harrison, *Drink and the Victorians – the temperance question in England 1815-1872* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed). (Staffordshire, UK: Keele University Press, 1994), 169.

<sup>6</sup> Coleman Baptist Church website, accessed 27/03/2023.

<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup>

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

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<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup>

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.'<sup>10</sup> 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

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<sup>9</sup> Haymes, Gouldbourne, and Cross, *On Being the Church*, 53.

<sup>10</sup> 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.'<sup>11</sup> 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'.<sup>12</sup> Hearing in this embodied manner is an act of empowerment which 'breaks through political and social structures to be heard by the disinherited.'<sup>13</sup> 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.'<sup>14</sup> 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.

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<sup>11</sup> Nell Morton, *The Journey is Home*, (Boston, USA: Beacon Press, 1985), 125.

<sup>12</sup> Morton, *The Journey is Home*, 125.

<sup>13</sup> Morton, *The Journey is Home*, 128.

<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup>

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

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<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup>

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'.<sup>17</sup> 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?<sup>18</sup> My argument is to

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<sup>16</sup> World Council of Churches, *Facilitating dialogue*, 47.

<sup>17</sup> World Council of Churches, *Facilitating dialogue*, 46.

<sup>18</sup> 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](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 hooks<sup>19</sup> 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'<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup> 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.'<sup>22</sup> 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'<sup>23</sup> 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

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<sup>19</sup> bell hooks, *Teaching to transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>20</sup> hooks, *Teaching to transgress*, 12.

<sup>21</sup> hooks, *Teaching to transgress*, 24-29.

<sup>22</sup> hooks, *Teaching to transgress*, 43.

<sup>23</sup> 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'.<sup>24</sup>

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.<sup>25</sup>

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

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<sup>24</sup> Mirza, *Black British Feminism*, 274.

<sup>25</sup> 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.’<sup>26</sup> Likewise, Angela Reed argues that congregational governance-led churches ‘require structure for discernment.’<sup>27</sup> 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.

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<sup>26</sup> Haymes et al, *On Being the Church*, 91.

<sup>27</sup> 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.’<sup>28</sup> 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.<sup>29</sup>

Attending to one another for Jennings is to offer an intellectual affection that is ‘open toward more intense listening and learning from one another.’<sup>30</sup> 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.

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<sup>28</sup> Willie James Jennings, *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020), 51.

<sup>29</sup> Jennings, *After Whiteness*, 72-73.

<sup>30</sup> 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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