



Church Planting and the Parish in Durham Diocese, 1970–1990: Church Growth Controversies in Recent Historical Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This article unearths the forgotten history of the first modern church planting scheme in the Church of England: an attempt to restructure parish ministry in Chester-le-Street, near Durham, in the 1970s and 1980s. This story of rapid growth followed by decline, and of an evangelical church's strained relations with their liberal bishop, David Jenkins, has pertinence for contemporary Anglican antagonisms over 'fresh expressions' and other church planting programmes. A culture of mistrust is arguably apparent both then and now, between liberals and conservatives in ecclesiology, even as the same line divides those of the reverse tendency in broader, doctrinal theology: conservatives from liberals. Developments, decisions and, indeed, debacles in the story of Chester-le-Street parish point to the urgent need for liberals and conservatives in Anglican ecclesiology and theology to overcome their mistrust of each other by recognizing the other as valuable for the mutual strengthening and renewal of the Church.

KEYWORDS: Chester-le-Street, Church of England, Church planting, Church growth, David Jenkins, Diocese of Durham, parish system, secularization, women's ordination

Church planting for church growth is controversial in contemporary Anglicanism. For over a decade, the 'fresh expressions' movement has proliferated across the Church of England, and spread elsewhere in the

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Anglican Communion, including to Australia, Canada and South Africa.² Prior related initiatives in the 1990s notably advocated church planting as 'a supplementary strategy' intended to enhance the parish system;³ but the particular emphasis of fresh expressions on establishing congregations through networks and interest groups rather than localities has attracted robust criticism for undermining the traditional patterns and priorities of Anglican parochial ministry.⁴ Across the same period, the alternative 'trans-planting' enterprises of large evangelical-charismatic churches, including pre-eminently Holy Trinity Brompton in central London, have caused further contention in the Church of England.⁵ Elements of the latter disquiet include concerns that resources are being channelled into churches geared to attracting urban, middle-class graduates. Linked by some to the Archbishops of Canterbury and York's broader Renewal and Reform programme, such church planting is perceived to be detrimental to Anglicanism's treasured social breadth and provincial diversity.⁶

The earliest church planting programme in the modern Church of England is commonly cited as a scheme in Chester-le-Street, Durham diocese. This is a context strikingly at variance with the educated affluence and metropolitan fervour assumed in more recent planting caricature.⁷ In 1972, the then rector of Chester-le-Street, Patrick Blair, devised a plan to plant congregations in outlying residential neighbourhoods within the single parish encompassing the small market

2. *Mission-shaped Church: Church Planting and Fresh Expressions of Church in a Changing Context* (London: Church House Publishing, 2004), available at: <https://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/international> (accessed 20 August 2016).

3. Pat Harris (ed.), *Breaking New Ground* (London: Church House Publishing, 1994), p. v.

4. Andrew Davison and Alison Milbank, *For the Parish: A Critique of Fresh Expressions* (London: SCM, 2010). See also Louise Nelstrop and Martyn Percy (eds), *Evaluating Fresh Expressions: Explorations in Emerging Church* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2008).

5. John Wolfe and Bob Jackson, 'Anglican Resurgence: the Church of England in London', in David Goodhew (ed.), *Church Growth in Britain: 1980 to the Present* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), p. 35.

6. Martyn Percy, *The Future Shapes of Anglicanism: Currents, Contours, Charts* (New York: Routledge, 2017), pp. 117-24; see also: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/aug/13/church-of-england-evangelical-drive> (accessed 18 August 2016).

7. Bob Hopkins, *Church Planting: Models for Mission in the Church of England* (Nottingham: Grove, 1988), p. 9; *Mission-shaped Church*, p. 16; George Lings, 'A History of Fresh Expressions and Church Planting in the Church of England', in Goodhew (ed.), *Church Growth in Britain*, pp. 161-78 (165).

town that lies halfway between Durham and Newcastle-upon-Tyne. Portions of the historic town-centre church body were encouraged to meet for three Sundays out of four each month in venues in their local areas, such as community centres, schools, and even pubs. Eventually, six such 'Area Churches' were planted by the 1980s, constituting satellites of Chester-le-Street parish church, yet with varying degrees of autonomy. Blair's successor from 1978, Ian Bunting, consolidated the planting strategy, and oversaw a period of spectacular numerical growth across the combined congregations around 1980. Chester-le-Street duly became a prominent location in the national 'Church Growth Movement' of the 1980s, the only Anglican congregation north of London to feature in the 1984 volume *Ten Growing Churches*.⁸

Today, memories of a time of growth persist in Chester-le-Street, but many of the initiatives of the 1970s and 1980s have shrunk, contracted and closed. The Anglican Christian presence in the town retains a shape adopted in the planting period: two satellite congregations, now called 'Parish North' and 'Parish South', continue to meet in school buildings, while 'Parish Central' still congregates in the medieval church of St Mary and St Cuthbert. Decline was apparent by the early 1990s, acknowledged by Bunting's immediate successor, Geoffrey Walker, then by subsequent rectors, each of whom reportedly wrestled with the burden of popular memory recalling a golden age of a packed Parish Church and full venues across the town.

The rise of Chester-le-Street's Area Church plants is a story once relatively widely told, publicized in several sympathetic publications close to the height of its success.⁹ The subsequent decline of the planting programme is, by contrast, a story almost unknown, forgotten outside the town, and commonly regarded as too painful or inconvenient to trace within the parish. Recovered and retold in this article, both phases of this story contain pertinent instruction for more current ill-feeling over Anglican church planting and growth agendas today.

This pertinence stems principally from how the experiments and achievements of Chester-le-Street parish between 1970 and 1990 provoked disagreement at the time, rather than precisely prefiguring all

8. Kerry M. Thorpe, 'St Mary's and St Cuthbert's, Chester-le-Street', in Eddie Gibbs (ed.), *Ten Growing Churches* (London: MARC, 1984), pp. 126-43. On the Church Growth Movement, see Eddie Gibbs, *I Believe in Church Growth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981).

9. Thorpe, 'Chester-le-Street'; Ian Bunting, *Claiming the Urban Village* (Nottingham: Grove, 1989).

subsequent church-planting schemes.¹⁰ Local opinion was predictably divided over the innovations of an evangelical parish in a predominantly Anglo-Catholic diocese; but a particular tension was generated by both the reputation and intervention of the Bishop of Durham, David Jenkins. This tension may be defined as a conflict between two positions: a church apparently liberal in its ecclesiology yet fairly conservative in its doctrinal theology relating to a bishop notorious for his liberal theology yet still apparently rather conservative in his ecclesiology. Such differences bred a climate of mistrust at a crucial moment in the life and development of the model of ministry pioneered in Chester-le-Street. This influenced a series of decisions in the late 1980s which appear now to have undermined the sustainability and strategic direction of the church. With hindsight, this climate of mistrust seems itself misplaced: neither side was quite as conservative or liberal in the ways perceived, and each arguably had something to offer the other which might well have strengthened and matured Anglican life in both Chester-le-Street and the wider Durham diocese in subsequent decades. Instead, the Church of England in the region was weakened by such mistrust, and an opportunity for broader growth – in numbers *and* depth of faith – was lost.

A Church in Context

A Christian church was established in Chester-le-Street in 883, when the body of St Cuthbert was brought by monks fleeing Viking raids on Lindisfarne. For over a century this was Cuthbert's shrine, becoming a prominent site of pilgrimage. Cuthbert's remains (and the region's cathedral) eventually moved south to Durham, leaving a parish church that was rebuilt twice during the Middle Ages. From 1286 until the Reformation, Chester-le-Street was a collegiate church, led by a Dean and chapter – a team of senior and junior clergy ministering to a surrounding area. After 1540, the medieval building became a parish church once more.¹¹

10. It is acknowledged that the church-planting approach within the single Chester-le-Street parish differs from other more 'invasive' initiatives involving planting across parish boundaries, or into discrete parishes. While many aspects of the Chester-le-Street experiment notably foreshadow 'fresh expressions', the reputation that some forms of church planting have for undermining the geographical parish system does not apply in the Chester-le-Street case.

11. W.O. Blunt, *A Thousand Years of the Church in Chester-le-Street* (London: 1884).

Three centuries later, with the advent of industrialization, the usual pattern of Victorian Anglican church building was notably not followed in Chester-le-Street. In most urbanizing areas across England, temporary mission churches were built, often at a distance from the historic parish church. When sufficient funds were raised, the mission church was replaced by a more permanent structure, and the original parish was subdivided. Around Chester-le-Street, most of the coal-mining settlements that sprang up in the nineteenth century proved temporary, with migrant populations dispersing elsewhere. This meant that the mission churches planted in Pelton Fell, Plawsworth, Waldridge and Chester Moor never grew into the kinds of sustainable congregations that justified parish subdivision. As they declined, Chester-le-Street stayed a single parish.

After both 1918 and 1945, Chester-le-Street itself witnessed considerable expansion, as green-field social and private housing estates were built southwards, westwards and northwards. Some of these developments gradually rehoused families from central terraced streets, but the population also grew from inward migration, increasing from 12,000 in 1907, to 18,000 in 1947, to 24,000 in 1977.¹² Road and rail links to Durham and Newcastle, and proximity to new industrial sites around the post-war New Town at Washington, attracted commuters to Chester-le-Street. Despite the rising population, the Anglican parish remained undivided.

With the population boom, a modern history of the parish has identified the 1950s as when the Parish Church reached its 'peak of performance'.¹³ Between the 1940s and early 1960s, communicants at Easter Sunday, Whitsunday and Christmas Day services all rose.¹⁴ By the early 1960s increases in Easter communicants had even outpaced population growth, rising to over 1100 (5–6 per cent of the entire local population).¹⁵ Numbers of baptisms in the Chester-le-Street parish church also grew briefly in the post-war period, then levelled off. Church marriages remained level for a time too.¹⁶ However, from various points during the 1960s, communicants on each of the principal festival days, as well as baptism figures, all declined. Incomplete

12. Ian Bunting and Jim Brewster, *1883–1983: The Eleventh Century of the Parish Church in Chester-le-Street* (Chester-le-Street: The Parish Church of St Mary and St Cuthbert, 1983), p. 124.

13. Bunting and Brewster, *Chester-le-Street*, p. 37.

14. Bunting and Brewster, *Chester-le-Street*, p. 124.

15. Bunting and Brewster, *Chester-le-Street*, p. 124.

16. Bunting and Brewster, *Chester-le-Street*, p. 124.

records of the Electoral Roll likewise indicate numbers entering a steep decline: in 1966, the Roll stood at 2672 names, and in 1969, 2015 names.¹⁷ By 1978 the Electoral Roll was 712 names.¹⁸

This pattern of numerical growth and decline in Chester-le-Street church strikingly mirrors recent historical interpretations of secularization in modern Britain. Since 2001, the academic debate over religious decline has been refocused onto cultural developments in the post-Second World War period, and not, as before, on Victorian and Edwardian social and intellectual change.¹⁹ It is now argued that in the 1950s, Christian initiation and church-going, especially at the principal Christian festivals, remained normal, expected behaviours in Britain, shaped by the predominant cultural discourse and gender identities.²⁰ Only in the 1960s did popular norms shift, displacing Christianity's hegemony in the culture and undermining earlier expectations, especially upon women, that religious observance should be sustained across generations.²¹ Attending church or Sunday school, and the popularity of the Occasional Offices, have been in overall national decline ever since. While historians and sociologists continue to debate the chronology and extent of this secularizing shift, most scholars nonetheless incorporate a new attention to changes in the 1960s within their broader narratives of religious change in modern Britain.²² So the trajectory of the figures from Chester-le-Street reflect a national picture of church decline writ small in one town.

The Area Churches

The rector of Chester-le-Street throughout the 1960s was Tony Spurr, previously a Church Missionary Society missionary to Kashmir. When

17. Durham County Record Office (DCRO), EP/CS 6/2 PCC Minutes, 22 January 1959–15 April 1969.

18. DCRO, EP/CS 6/33 PCC Minutes, 27 April 1978–8 March 1988. Even this figure was noted to be 'a big increase on the previous Roll'. Just how low the Electoral Roll dropped during the 1970s is not known, due to missing records.

19. Jeremy Morris, 'The Strange Death of Christian Britain: Another Look at the Secularization Debate', *Historical Journal*, 46.4 (2003), pp. 963–76.

20. Callum Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain* (London: Routledge, 2001); Clive Field, *Britain's Last Religious Revival?* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

21. Brown, *Death of Christian Britain*, pp. 175–92; Hugh McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

22. Steve Bruce, *Secularization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Simon Green, *The Passing of Protestant England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain: a Persistent Paradox* (Chichester: Wiley, 2015).

numbers and church finances began falling, Spurr recognized a need for reorganization and redirection, but struggled to assert his authority. In 1969, Spurr backed an enterprising curate, Sturge Artiss, to turn Sunday Matins into a Family Communion service. The Area Dean reported that this was 'resented by the older ... people who come of evangelical stock', and led to 'decreasing congregations (though still quite good), decreasing offerings and some very strained PCC meetings'.²³ Divisions persisted, leading to the Church Wardens being forced to resign in 1970, only to be reappointed in 1971, when Spurr announced his intention to leave.²⁴

Spurr's replacement in this divided parish was the 40-year-old Patrick Blair, who had no previous experience as a parish incumbent, having been variously a school chaplain, chaplain to the Anglican Archbishop in Jerusalem, and Provost of Khartoum Cathedral, Sudan.²⁵ Blair not only maintained the contentious 'family service' at Chester-le-Street Parish Church, but also soon unveiled plans to expand the church's reach to families on surrounding housing estates through congregation plants. These 'Area Churches' were, from the beginning, designed for a three-fold incarnational purpose: to 'provide a Christian presence in the communities where people lived'; to assume 'pastoral responsibility for the area in which the congregation met', including providing (predominantly lay) pastoral care in emergencies and around baptisms, weddings and funerals; and, thirdly, to offer what was termed 'a holistic witness to the Gospel' through designated groups orientated towards welcoming newcomers, developing Christian knowledge and discipleship, or offering practical support in neighbours' lives.²⁶

Blair has been characterized as a man of 'strong evangelical convictions'.²⁷ The commitments of Christian Baptism were especially prominent in Blair's thinking, and he clearly balked at the apparent willingness of predecessors to baptize, according to one local history, 'practically any child ... usually at very short notice' in a separate afternoon service.²⁸ Blair required more of parents, introducing a

23. Durham University Library, Durham Diocese Records (DDR)/BP/PAR/6/26, J.Ll. Rowlands to the Archdeacon of Durham, [1969].

24. Bunting and Brewster, *Chester-le-Street*, pp. 49-50.

25. 'Obituary' *Church Times*, 4 November 2011. Blair's obituary made lamentably little reference to his ministry in Chester-le-Street, with no mention of the Area Churches scheme.

26. Bunting, *Urban Village*, pp. 4, 23.

27. Bunting and Brewster, *Chester-le-Street*, p. 60.

28. Bunting and Brewster, *Chester-le-Street*, p. 60.

preparation period before a baptism ceremony, some simple reading material, a Saturday evening class, and a signing to confirm acceptance of the future commitment involved (steps and customs adopted, not without controversy, by increasing numbers of Anglican churches elsewhere since).²⁹ It was Blair's intention that parents should choose their local Area Church as the context for baptism, with the planted congregations better able to build welcome structures for families.

The first Area Family Service was held in South Pelaw, a mixed council and private estate north-west of the town centre, on 19 November 1971. Meeting in a community centre, services were for three years led by the congregation themselves, with the rector pre-recording a sermon on cassette tape.³⁰ Subsequently, a full-time Church Army evangelist was assigned, with form and content remaining standard for an Anglican Service of the Word. On the first Sunday of each month, the Pelaw group rejoined the Parish Church congregation for a communion service.

In 1973, a similar pattern was followed in Garden Farm, an estate of modest owner-occupied properties, though a full-time Curate was assigned from the beginning to lead services. The congregation met in a location causing some reservations initially: the Garden Farm pub. A Sunday school class was convened in the 'Ladies Powder Room', sermons were preached over the pool table, and for a period worship was (memorably) conducted 'with the Go-Go dancers' cage as a backdrop'.³¹ After a while, Garden Farm Area Church outgrew the venue and moved to the nearby Hermitage School, and was renamed 'Hermitage'.

It was also in 1973 that the last surviving Victorian mission church was closed at Pelton Fell, a former mining settlement west of the town. The congregation reconvened as an Area Church in their Village Hall, remaining a lay-run body without designated assistance until a Deaconess was assigned after 1980.

In 1974, the fourth Area Church began meeting in North Lodge secondary school, again with no assigned leader in ministry. This more middle-class estate on the northern boundary of the town, convenient for the A1 motorway, was home to many commuting professionals. This Area Church struggled after a section of those setting it up returned to the Parish Church. The congregation closed in 1977, then reopened with new lay and ordained leadership in 1981.³²

29. Bunting and Brewster, *Chester-le-Street*, p. 57.

30. Thorpe, 'Chester-le-Street', p. 131.

31. Bunting and Brewster, *Chester-le-Street*, p. 52.

32. Thorpe, 'Chester-le-Street', pp. 134-36.

A large estate of local authority housing west of Chester-le-Street town centre was identified as a location for an Area Church in Blair's original 1972 strategic plan. Few existing attenders of the Parish Church lived on this council estate to begin with, prompting Blair to appoint Deaconess Isabel Wells to lay the groundwork for a 'West Area' start-up congregation by taking up residence on the estate, and undertaking home visits and pastoral care work. Wells became a known and trusted figure on the estate. Over several years, a Bible-study group was formed, then an annual Christmas carol service, then harvest festival and Mothering Sunday services. In 1979, a single monthly service began meeting in the Tenants Association Social Club, and became a weekly service in 1982.³³

The sixth and final Area Church was established by the early 1980s at Chester Moor, a former pit-village to the south of Chester-le-Street, where once a mission church had stood. Meeting monthly in a community hut, this service never reached the frequency of the other Areas.³⁴

The Nature of Growth

Establishing the Area Churches involved a deliberate dispersal of the Chester-le-Street congregation across its local neighbourhoods for three out of four Sundays. This naturally reduced numbers at the Parish Church for a period, even as attendance at the First Sunday Communion was largely sustained. Baptism figures continued to decline, however, apparently in response to Blair's more rigorous baptism policy. A perception grew in the town that only children of church members could be baptized. While this was not actually the case, resentment was generated. The beginnings of growth in the Area Churches eventually indicated where this resentment was overcome.³⁵

Patrick Blair resigned from the Chester-le-Street parish in 1977, moving to become Team Rector of St Margaret's, Barking, in Chelmsford diocese. Blair was succeeded by Ian Bunting, previously a tutor in Pastoral Theology at Cranmer Hall, the Anglican training institution within St John's College, Durham. Bunting was familiar with Chester-le-Street already: the parish was a St John's living, and Cranmer Hall sent teams of 8–10 ordinands on placement to the Area Churches during the 1970s. Bunting began with a sermon series on his vision for the further

33. Thorpe, 'Chester-le-Street', p. 135.

34. Thorpe, 'Chester-le-Street', p. 142.

35. Bunting and Brewster, *Chester-le-Street*, p. 58.

Table 1. Typical attendance between 1979 and 1985

Area congregation Sunday 10 am service	1979	1982	1985
Parish Church	197	268	198
Garden Farm/Hermitage	94	141	121
Pelaw	87	116	85
North Lodge	-	54	53
West	-	54	56
Pelton Fell	28	33	33
Chester Moor	-	-	23
Other Parish Church services			
Sunday 8 am	39	60	50
Sunday 6 pm	76	130	148
Thursday Holy Communion	50	59	76
<i>Total</i>	571	915	843

development of the Area Churches, offering an organic metaphor for the future: Chester-le-Street church was growing like a strawberry plant, sending out runners 'and wherever they land they establish a new plant'.³⁶

The first years of Bunting's incumbency were a period of substantial growth in church attendance in the Chester-le-Street parish. Analysis of the archived Parish Church Registers of Services produces a range of average measures confirming a striking upturn after decline.³⁷ In the post-war period, aside from spectacular numbers of communicants on 'High' Sundays such as Easter and Christmas, figures recorded for Parish Church morning services at other times of year actually peaked around the 200 mark, before declining to below 100 in the late 1960s. During the 1970s, the average numbers at the first Sunday of the monthly family communion, incorporating members of the Area congregations, edged slowly back above 200. Between 1977 and 1980, attendances at this monthly service then jumped, averaging over 400, with over 500 on some Sundays in 1981–82. Across other Sundays in the month, similar or yet higher total numbers were spread across the Area Churches, as by no means all involved in the Areas made it to the 'first Sunday' gathering. Snapshots of the typical attendance at all six Area congregations and the Parish Church are available from dates between 1979 and 1985, showing a peak in 1982 (Table 1).³⁸

36. Ian Bunting, 'Following the Strawberry Plant', *Partners*, 10 (Summer 1985), pp. 3–4.

37. The statistics in this paragraph are sourced from: DCRO, EP/CS/2/41–49, Registers of services at Chester-le-Street, St Mary and St Cuthbert, 1 January 1944–4 July 1999.

38. DCRO, EP/CS 6/33, Poulton Report.

An alternative measure highlighting the change in popularity of church services across the board is an averaging of total numbers at all services (including Areas) offered across a single month. In October 1970, 923 people were recorded at 20 Anglican services in Chester-le-Street, giving an average attendance at each of 46.15. This average declined further, then stabilized during Patrick Blair's ministry, but rose suddenly from 1977, reaching a high-point of 3249 people present at 31 services (average 104.81) in October 1982. After this, totals and averages began to decline, dropping to 1871 people at 29 services (average 64.5) by October 1987.³⁹ The Electoral Roll for the whole parish likewise rose to peak in 1982 at 1006 names, before dropping back to oscillate around 800 for the rest of the 1980s.⁴⁰

As many critics of church growth agendas observe, however, a focus on numbers (proverbial 'bums-on-seats' accounting) is a limited measure of how a church may 'grow'. Other aspects of a church's life can communicate more about health and faith commitment, and these also appear present in Chester-le-Street parish in the period.

The Area Churches were self-evidently a 'structure of evangelization' looking outwards within the parish system.⁴¹ Establishing a church at the very local level, in buildings used every day and situated within just a few hundred yards of where people lived, enabled congregations themselves to engage with their neighbours. When a couple living in the parish approached the church to baptize their child, they were not only visited by clergy and asked to attend their Area Church, but were also invited to an informal 'getting-to-know-you' evening hosted by local church couples. Here, neighbourly links were forged in person, and something of the ethos of Christian commitment and the practice of faith in the local context shared. If encouraged, invitations followed to join an 8-week Basic Christianity course, out of which ongoing midweek Bible-study groups in people's homes were often formed. By 1984, 23 separate home groups were meeting in Chester-le-Street parish.⁴²

A supplementary form of public evangelism raised the profile of the church in the town centre. Here, the rector's wife, Mair Bunting, a gifted leader in her own right, established a small lay team to share conversation, views on faith, and prayer, on the main shopping street. Women were invited to a daytime Bible discussion group at the

39. DCRO, EP/CS/2/45-46.

40. DCRO, EP/CS 6/33 PCC Minutes, 27 April 1978–8 March 1988.

41. Bunting, *Urban Village*, p. 23.

42. Thorpe, 'Chester-le-Street', pp. 138-39.

Rectory. Alternative 'men's nights' were held in local pubs, inviting 'the husbands of those wives who worship ... unaccompanied by their male partners', and were reported to involve 'lively discussions on Christian matters'.⁴³

The Area Churches also provided a 'structure for innovation' internally, not only managing potential conflict over change and variety in the church, especially in worship styles, but also pioneering new forms of social outreach and lay pastoral provision. Several Chester-le-Street congregations were influenced by the emerging Charismatic renewal movement, and by the availability of more informal and experimental liturgies. Area Churches enabled the lay energy and enthusiasm for these alternative styles to be channelled in 'safe-spaces', rather than cause ructions and division over use of the medieval church building. The Area Churches also relied extensively on the encouragement of lay gifts in leadership. The Buntings initiated an in-house training programme for lay worship-leaders and preachers, training 12 women and 12 men to serve the Areas by 1985.⁴⁴ Youth work also expanded significantly in the period, with a large team of lay volunteers. The C.Y.F.A. group for teenagers in the 1980s generated numerous future vocations in Christian ministry.⁴⁵

Further lay initiatives were spawned by Bunting's reported challenge to all congregation members to 'find a need and fill it'.⁴⁶ Individual Area Churches devised programmes in their local neighbourhoods: one scheme offered support for those known to be returning home from a period in hospital; another, yet larger, scheme trained teams of volunteers to sit over night with the terminally ill at home, ensuring some respite for carers. Wider pastoral visiting programmes were also organized, with teams visiting the elderly, the bereaved and housebound.

Teams were also at the heart of how clergy operated in Chester-le-Street. Under Blair and Bunting the numbers of assisting clergy as well as lay leaders in the parish expanded. By the early 1980s, both Garden Farm/Hermitage and South Pelaw were assigned curates, while North Lodge, Pelton Fell and West Area all had deaconesses. Rob and Margaret Bianchi were a curate and deaconess couple working with Pelaw and North Lodge from 1981 to 1984. When the

43. DCRO, EP/CS/6/33, PCC minutes, Annual Report 1979.

44. DCRO, EP/CS 6/33, Poulton Report, [p. 16].

45. I am grateful to Sharon Pritchard, Durham Diocese Children's Ministry Advisor, for this information.

46. Thorpe, 'Chester-le-Street', p. 141.

Bianchi moved on, they were replaced by a further clergy couple, Frank and Alison White, this time assigned to the Parish Church and West Area. Stephen Taylor and deaconess Amiel Osmaston were deployed at a similar time across Pelaw, North Lodge and Hermitage.⁴⁷ While clergy were individually associated with certain Areas, as if to their own 'parochial' contexts within the larger parish, the value of team working and corporate discernment were strongly emphasized. This was notably a decade or more before the Team and Group Measure of 1995 formalized the modern definitions and structures of 'team ministry' and 'group ministry' in the Church of England.⁴⁸

With Deaconess Isabel Wells' original work in the West Area from 1974 to 1984, followed by the ministry of Margaret Bianchi, Alison White and Amiel Osmaston in the mid 1980s, and then Anne Black, Margi Walker and Florence Beresford in the late 1980s, Chester-le-Street is revealed to have been a significant location for the promotion of women's ministry in the Church of England.⁴⁹ Bunting's style of leadership and team management is remembered for encouraging experiment and initiative among his junior clergy, delegating significant responsibility to both curates and deaconesses, while also being willing to step in personally and take the blame if things went wrong.⁵⁰ The levels of autonomy granted to the Area Churches, including those overseen by a deaconess (female deacon after 1987), meant these women enjoyed a perhaps unparalleled level of localized leadership in the Church of England at the time. In 1987, the parish was recognized as 'well accustomed to and encouraging of women's ministry', and was strongly supportive of the campaign for women's ordination to the priesthood.⁵¹

47. DCRO, EP/CS 6/33, PCC Minutes, 27 April 1978–8 March 1988, Annual Report 1984. Alison White was an NSM in Chester-le-Street, 1986–89. Both Alison White and Amiel Osmaston were ordained deacon in 1987.

48. Earlier legal provision for collaborative ministry between ordained clergy was introduced by the Pastoral Measure 1968, and developed and amended by the Pastoral Measure 1983. *Mission and Pastoral Measure 2011 Code of Recommended Practice: Volume 1 Pastoral Reorganisation*, p. 2. Available at: <https://www.churchofengland.org/clergy-office-holders/pastoralandclosedchurches/mpm2011code.aspx> (accessed 30 October 2017).

49. DDR/BP/PAR/7/29, *Outreach* magazine, August 1990.

50. Frank White, personal conversation with the author, 11 February 2016; Amiel Osmaston, personal correspondence with the author, 8 December 2015; Margaret Bianchi, personal correspondence with the author, 30 January 2016.

51. DDR/BP/DIO/11/3 Archdeacon's enquiry forms 1987.

After Growth

By 1985, Ian Bunting sought to take stock of progress in the strawberry-plant strategy by commissioning John Poulton, Vice Dean of Norwich Cathedral, to review the life and direction of the church in Chester-le-Street.⁵² Poulton had previously led a team from the Archbishops' Council on Evangelism to review another growing charismatic-evangelical Anglican church in the North of England – St Michael-le-Belfrey, York – in 1977.⁵³ This team had notably recommended changes to St Michael's leadership structures, releasing its then incumbent, David Watson, to assume an alternative role, while reallocating some leadership responsibilities elsewhere in the clergy term. At Chester-le-Street, Poulton was asked to provide a perspective on ministerial deployment across the town, to review the functions and purposes of the lay leadership groups in each Area Church, and to analyse the relationship between the Parish Church and the Areas.⁵⁴ Poulton visited the parish twice, in November 1985 and March 1986, producing a preliminary report, made public in January 1986. The final report remained unfinished, however, as Poulton died suddenly in January 1987.

Even as it stood, Canon Poulton's preliminary report uncovered several underlying issues in the life of the Chester-le-Street parish, and put forward a range of recommendations for change. Poulton considered there to be few other places in the Church of England 'where one would be quite as aware quite as soon of the impact of a parish on young working families, and a process of real conversion to Christ ... the participatory and enthusiastic nature of things is very obvious to any visitor'.⁵⁵ Even so, Poulton could see the Area Churches were, in fact, 'plateauing' in numbers. Newcomers were still joining the congregations, but almost equal numbers were 'bleeding' from the church, whether moving away, or no longer attending. The church was 'geared constantly to bringing people to faith or helping very young Christians to begin in the Christian faith'; but it needed to turn its attention to 'the teaching and nurturing of Christian people', developing a 'more mature style' in some Sunday services, and providing opportunities of depth for 'those with intellectual demands'.⁵⁶

52. Bunting, 'Strawberry Plant', 4.

53. Ian Bunting, *The Evangelical Anglican Way* (forthcoming), ch. 11. I am grateful to Canon Bunting for sight of this work-in-progress.

54. Bunting, 'Strawberry Plant', 4.

55. DCRO, EP/CS 6/33, Poulton Report, p. 8.

56. Poulton Report, p. 19.

In Poulton's view, the Area Churches needed greater autonomy, allowing them to respond more coherently and consistently to their localities. Teaching and nurturing Christians would therefore include looking for leaders within each Area to be trained and potentially ordained. This in turn would facilitate the introduction of Communion services for the Area congregations. Establishing Eucharist-centred worship in the Areas would be one step towards broadening worship styles, away from an apparent evangelical-charismatic monopoly, to cater for a constituency looking for worship that was 'quieter, less boisterous ... [with] room for a greater awareness of the numinous'.⁵⁷

Poulton's most arresting recommendation was to restructure the clergy team around a Director of Education and Ministerial Training, or 'Dean' (recalling the medieval collegiate arrangement). This role was designed to release Ian Bunting from ongoing parish responsibilities, enabling a concentration on lay and clergy team development. The historic post of rector would resume its tie to the Parish Church, and Poulton informally suggested Frank White, nearing the end of his second curacy, might be a suitable continuity candidate. Poulton further advocated formalizing what he called the 'almost unique situation' of the parish in the Church of England, by creating an 'Area of Ministerial Experiment'. This would enable Chester-le-Street 'to try out ... ideas and schemes which are not normally allowable elsewhere'.⁵⁸

Few of Poulton's recommendations were realized, the exception being Communion in the Area Churches and, eventually, more lay leaders formally licensed.⁵⁹ The Chester-le-Street church's own records state that the Patrons, St John's College, Durham, refused the restructuring proposal and evolution in roles for Ian Bunting and Frank White.⁶⁰ Substantial changes followed immediately. In early 1987, White was appointed a hospital chaplain in Durham, and the Buntings announced their own intention to leave in the summer, believing this would 'foreshorten ... any period of uncertainty'.⁶¹ A new rector was appointed and installed by autumn 1987: Geoffrey Walker, previously Vicar of St Andrew's, Monkwearmouth, in nearby Sunderland.

Walker brought a recognizably more 'central' Anglican churchmanship to the parish, having trained at Ripon Hall, Oxford, and served

57. Poulton Report, p. 10.

58. Poulton Report, p.17.

59. DDR/BP/DIO/11/3 Archdeacon's enquiry forms 1987; DDR/BP/PAR/7/29, *Outreach* magazine, August 1990.

60. DCRO, EP/CS 6/33, Rector's Report 1986-7.

61. Rector's Report 1986-7.

a second curacy at Great St Mary's, Cambridge. Popular memory in Chester-le-Street alleges that Walker brought a very different approach to leadership, of both clergy and the many lay volunteers. Reining-in lay ministry initiatives, Walker set strict boundaries on the way Communion would be introduced to the Areas: no lay people would be involved, nor even members of the wider clergy team. Only the rector himself would celebrate when and wherever he was scheduled to lead worship outside the Parish Church. This meant, in effect, a Eucharist only once every two months in each church plant.⁶² 'Communion by Extension' was prohibited by the diocese for such a fixed arrangement as the Area Churches. Congregations are known to have expressed frustration at this rigorous application of canonical rules, especially where a female deacon was viewed with some pride as a neighbourhood's 'own minister', and therefore the person naturally looked to for leading a local Eucharist.⁶³

Over the next few years, each of the clergy team originally appointed by Bunting moved on, but were not always replaced, as the diocese was unwilling to sustain earlier levels of funding.⁶⁴ Walker carried out a succession of reviews of the Area Churches, personally concluding that they remained reliant on clergy, and downplaying the expectation that they might be sustainable with long-term lay leadership.⁶⁵ Although Walker made the case for replacement clergy, he lost out to other parishes and diocesan budget restraint in a cooling economic climate. Across the 1990s, including after Walker's departure in 1993, the size of the clergy team in Chester-le-Street continued to contract. As lay ministries remained more restricted, with formal Reader licensing a lengthy procedure regulated by the diocese, replacement lay leadership structures appeared only slowly. The Area Churches declined in attendances and outreach initiatives, leading to amalgamations and closures by the 2000s.

A Climate of Mistrust

The recollections of some key contemporary figures, set beside the evidence of the Durham diocese archives, reveal a more complex story

62. DDR/BP/PAR/6/26, Geoffrey Walker to David Jenkins, 19 May 1988.

63. By 1989, a licensing system was introduced by the diocese for 15 lay people nominated to 'assist with the administration of the bread and wine' in the Area Churches. DDR/BP/PAR/7/29, Geoffrey Walker to David Jenkins, 15 September 1989.

64. DDR/BP/PAR/6/26, Michael Ball to David Jenkins 9 December 1987; DDR/BP/PAR/7/29, Geoffrey Walker to David Jenkins, 23 March 1990; 9 April 1990; 14 April 1990.

65. DDR/BP/PAR/7/29 Geoffrey Walker to David Jenkins, 12 January 1990.

behind these responses to John Poulton's report and the direction taken in Chester-le-Street parish since 1986.⁶⁶ The principal agent blocking the proposed rearrangement of clergy roles and the creation of an 'Area of Ministerial Experiment' was not the Patrons, but David Jenkins, Bishop of Durham. Bishop Jenkins called White for a personal interview soon after Poulton's recommendations were made public, and ruled out the restructured rectorship as not right for him (a decision which White notably now admits was probably right for him personally, as the role would likely have been extremely demanding at his stage of career).⁶⁷ Jenkins instead directed White to move elsewhere, approving his transfer to Durham Hospital, then appointing him Vicar of Birtley - a parish neighbouring Chester-le-Street - in 1989.

Ian Bunting passionately disagreed with Jenkins' intervention and assessment of White's readiness, and privately made this clear to the bishop.⁶⁸ In June 1986, the Chester-le-Street Parochial Church Council had voted overwhelmingly in favour of the change of roles projected for Bunting and White, as well as approving the introduction of Communion services into the Areas and moves to recognize lay ministry more formally.⁶⁹ Deeply disappointed by such episcopal overruling of the will of the parish, Bunting indicated he now wanted a change of scene. In September 1986, he wrote formally to Jenkins to 'accept your decision over the future of the ministry at Chester-le-Street', and indicated he would take some time to consider 'your suggestion' for his future - revealed since as an incumbency in the south of the diocese.⁷⁰ Bunting eventually declined Jenkins' offer the next year, and took up a two-year research fellowship at Oak Hill theological college in London, during which he wrote a Grove booklet relating his Chester-le-Street experience to the phenomenon of Base Ecclesial Communities in South America.⁷¹

During autumn 1986, a large body of representatives from the Area Churches met with senior diocesan staff to hear their response to the Poulton proposals and their 'reasons for the decisions which

66. I am grateful to the Bishop of Durham for granting permission to access the Durham diocese archives relating to Chester-le-Street parish, 1987-90.

67. Frank White, personal conversation with the author, 11 February 2016. White was subsequently Assistant Bishop of Newcastle.

68. Ian Bunting, personal communication to the author, 2 March 2016.

69. DDR/BP/PAR/6/26, Chester-le-Street Deanery pastoral report, July 1986.

70. DDR/BP/PAR/6/26, 17 Sep 1986, Ian Bunting to David Jenkins.

71. Bunting, *Urban Village*.

have been taken'.⁷² Before the event, Bunting informed the suffragan Bishop of Jarrow, Michael Ball, that the parish had been deeply affected by the diocese's intervention: 'some of our members are angry, frustrated and confused, though a minority are pleased with the outcome ... it will help if they have some opportunity to express themselves'. Bunting further implied that as 'one proposed solution' to the question of the long-term continuity of Chester-le-Street's unusual structure of ministry had been rejected, alternatives would now be expected, as the parish wanted 'reassurance' for its future.⁷³ The diocese provided no such alternative, but upheld the singular, historic role of rector.

In April 1987, Bishop Jenkins discreetly approached Geoffrey Walker directly, suggesting 'a possible move to Chester-le-Street ... as and when it falls vacant'.⁷⁴ Walker was duly confirmed as rector by the Patrons three months later.⁷⁵ Once in post, the nature of Walker's correspondence with Jenkins indicates a close sympathy, confirming his rumoured status as the bishop's ally in parish. Walker once declared to the serially embattled prelate: '... there are plenty of us in the trenches around you who will want to cover your back. We count ourselves fortunate to have you as our pastor and Bishop and would not want anyone else.'⁷⁶

An expression of such effusive loyalty would have been unlikely from either Walker's predecessor, Ian Bunting, or many others in the Chester-le-Street church before this. In common with most Anglican evangelicals, the Chester-le-Street clergy and laity had been deeply disturbed by David Jenkins' appointment as Bishop of Durham in 1984, with its accompanying, infamous furore over his televised pronouncements seeming to deny the 'literal truth' of the miracles of Jesus, the virgin birth and the resurrection.⁷⁷

Jenkins' selection for Durham maintained an intermittent modern tradition of appointing scholars to the See; yet his transition from academia to the episcopate proved exceptionally tumultuous. Jenkins underestimated the public shock at his voicing, in an Easter TV documentary series, an interpretation of the Gospels by then commonplace in universities and many theological colleges: namely, that they

72. DDR/BP/PAR/6/26, 20 November 1986, Ian Bunting to Michael Ball.

73. DDR/BP/PAR/6/26, 20 November 1986, Ian Bunting to Michael Ball.

74. DDR/BP/PAR/6/26, 3 April 1987, Geoffrey Walker to David Jenkins.

75. DDR/BP/PAR/6/26, 10 July 1987, St John's College, Durham to Durham diocese.

76. DDR/BP/PAR/7/29, 9 April 1990, Geoffrey Walker to David Jenkins.

77. David Jenkins, *The Calling of a Cuckoo: Not Quite an Autobiography* (London: Continuum, 2002), pp. 23-50.

were works of theology, not first-hand history.⁷⁸ Such a scholarly reading was still unfamiliar in most parishes or wider society. When York Minster caught fire two days after Jenkins' consecration, fringe claims of lightning bolts of divine disapproval attracted global press attention.⁷⁹ For a period, Jenkins embraced the media interest, believing it a welcome opportunity to share what he considered a modern, questioning, yet intellectually viable interpretation of faith to a wider audience beyond institutional Christianity. Press coverage nevertheless focused on the fierce opposition provoked in more conservative corners of the Church of England, and Jenkins was variously dubbed the 'Bishop of Blasphemy' and the 'unbelieving bishop'.⁸⁰

Two years later, there is little doubt that persisting unease over Jenkins' liberal theological opinions exacerbated the 'angry, frustrated and confused' reactions reported within the Chester-le-Street congregations in 1986–87. It is unclear how many in Chester-le-Street signed either local or national petitions protesting Jenkins' consecration; but the bishop received letters from parishioners objecting strongly to 'your blunt decision to override the recommendations of the Canon Poulton report' while casting doubt on his suitability as a Christian leader.⁸¹ One overwrought correspondent accused the bishop of having deliberately sabotaged the parish out of 'revenge ... [as] you know very well that Ian [Bunting], Frank [White] and the *whole* parish were against your appointment as bishop', concluding: 'I feel more and more that God and yourself are totally divorced. I call on you to resign before any more damage is done.'⁸²

Evangelicals in Chester-le-Street did not, however, have a monopoly in the sentiments of mistrust and suspicion when it came to the Area Churches. An alternative unease is traceable elsewhere in diocesan correspondence: complaints that the Area Churches were too informal, the secular buildings inappropriate for Christian worship, and unlicensed lay leadership illegitimate.⁸³ Anger was voiced over the 'monochrome conservative evangelicalism' of Chester-le-Street parish,

78. Richard Wallis, 'Channel 4 and the Declining Influence of Organized Religion on UK Television: The Case of *Jesus: The Evidence*', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* (2016).

79. Jenkins, *Cuckoo*, pp. 81–92.

80. Jenkins, *Cuckoo*, pp. 37, 135.

81. DDR/BP/PAR/6/26, 12 November 1986, D. Clenahan to David Jenkins. See also DDR/BP/PAR/7/29, 2 February 1990, P. Ward to David Jenkins.

82. DDR/BP/PAR/6/26, 12 November 1986, D. Clenahan to David Jenkins.

83. DDR/BP/PAR/6/26, 19 January 1987, S. Wroe to Michael Perry.

which 'excluded and disenfranchised' parishioners of other traditions.⁸⁴ The Bishop of Jarrow once suggested a prospective curate be vetted to ensure he was not an 'inflexible black scarf man'.⁸⁵

David Jenkins' approach to the Chester-le-Street parish suggests that he may have had some sympathy with these views, sharing some personal apprehension over the buildings used by the Area congregations, the lack of Holy Communion in the Christian practice located in the Areas, and the extensive involvement in worship services of lay people without formal diocesan approval. Welcoming Geoffrey Walker's cautious and controlling programme for expanding Communion provision, Jenkins admitted both he and his suffragan had been 'agonising' over Communion by extension, and 'were not at all happy about developments in Chester-le-Street except very much as a special case'.⁸⁶ A difficulty remained, in Jenkins' view, regarding 'the strict legality of ... a "regular" celebration of Holy Communion in centres which are not fully and properly licensed for public worship'.⁸⁷ The solution proposed by the bishop was for him to issue 'some sort of formal permission' for each building, though Jenkins pointedly asked for this procedure to remain secret: 'I do not wish it to be considered as an attempt to suppress, or get under control in the wrong way, activities which have developed in various centres around the parish'.⁸⁸ Despite Jenkins insisting such rulings were merely intended to 'remove any doubts and difficulties about the worthwhile things that you are doing', his eagerness only to 'regularise' practices, and his seeming nervousness around innovative, pioneering forms of lay and team ministry, could still be taken to point to a profoundly limited appreciation for what was being attempted and achieved in Chester-le-Street. Some might consider this a failing to see the proverbial wood for the trees in assessing the value of the constituent ingredients for growth that had generated the largest, most generous parish-share-paying church in Jenkins' diocese.

Conservative and Liberal Reconsidered

The period of the Poulton report and its aftermath was pivotal in the history of the church planting for church growth programme in

84. DDR/BP/PAR/6/26, 10 April 1987, K. Ottosson to David Jenkins.

85. DDR/BP/PAR/6/26, 9 December 1987, Michael Ball to David Jenkins.

86. DDR/BP/PAR/6/26, 10 June 1988, David Jenkins to Geoffrey Walker.

87. DDR/BP/PAR/6/26, 10 June 1988, David Jenkins to Geoffrey Walker.

88. DDR/BP/PAR/6/26, 10 June 1988, David Jenkins to Geoffrey Walker.

Chester-le-Street parish. The immediate responses of congregations and clergy, bishop and diocese, shaped the trajectory of the church in substantial ways for years to come. Evidently, all was not right with the Area Church plants at the time of the report's commissioning. Numerical growth was ending, and Poulton offered wise, reflective criticisms identifying failings. These were most notably in 'teaching and nurturing' once people had been brought to an initial commitment to Christian faith. The report's recommendations looked to facilitate consolidation, to stem the 'bleeding' of those dropping away from church life, before further growth was anticipated.

Poulton's criticisms and recommendations now seem poorly used by the diocese, not least by Bishop Jenkins, who can appear heavy-handed in his intervention, having scuppered, whether by accident or design, an innovative, restructured model of team ministry. By preserving a parochial system centred on the rector, by channelling efforts into introducing Eucharistic services in a way insensitive to perceptions of women's local leadership, and by condoning the curtailment of lay agency and initiative, the bishop and the diocese denied Chester-le-Street a leadership and parish model that may well have developed and enriched its church life further. Instead, the church planting programme effectively stalled. From the primary episcopal intervention followed the secondary, derivative decisions which shaped the future: the Buntings leaving, the dismantling of a culture that nurtured junior clergy and lay leadership teams, and the years of diminishing investment by the diocese, channelling spending elsewhere.

Exposing the climate of mutual mistrust that lurked behind these interventions and decisions, influencing the 'gut' reactions of parish and bishop, can suggest an inevitability to this misunderstanding, misfortune and mistake. The tension between alternative priorities and values, or what in the Anglican inheritance should be approached conservatively or liberally, seems too great. One party, Chester-le-Street church, held fast to traditional doctrinal formulas and modes of theological expression while handling inherited models of ministry and worship more loosely and lightly. The other party, the bishop, seemingly did the opposite, struggling to recognize the validity of a creative reinterpretation of parish ministry enthusing lay people and their surrounding communities, while himself busily recommunicating the truths of Christian faith in a radically open and unconstrained way.

Yet, revisiting Poulton's analysis of the condition and significance of the Chester-le-Street church plants in the mid 1980s, and reconsidering the respective reputations of both the parish and its bishop, it is possible to conclude that neither the parish nor bishop were as conservative or

as liberal as they were portrayed, and, in reality, what they might very well have needed at the time was each other.

David Jenkins always insisted that his efforts to communicate modern ways of talking about the Christian God from his public platform as the Bishop of Durham were missional in purpose: he was attempting to reach an audience outside the Church, to make clear that Christian beliefs were not as superstitious and intellectually indefensible as atheists assumed. Jenkins maintained that much of the correspondence he received at the time of his media notoriety urged him to continue in this endeavour, even as he was shocked to discover that within the Church of England ‘the emerging fault-line between the “traditionalists” and “liberals” was in fact ... an abyss’.⁸⁹ It was some time before Jenkins realized his mistake in believing television offered the same connection with people as the face-to-face encounter of his prior lecturing. Instead, he later reflected, ‘television lighting kills the twinkle in the eye’, making him out to be someone he was not, enabling newspapers to misreport what he really believed.⁹⁰ By contrast, for Jenkins, the ‘greatest encouragements’ he received in his ministry as a bishop were his interactions with the proverbial ‘ordinary men and women in the pew’, when visiting parishes in Durham diocese, and offering his teaching ministry in person, in preaching and conversation.⁹¹ In a memoir, Jenkins recalls a moving episode when an elderly Tyneside man approached him after a typical parish sermon relating modern theology to a biblical passage. The man said bluntly: ‘I’m not bothered about you now, bishop. I see what you’re doing. You’re explaining things. You’re a *teaching* vicar.’⁹²

Viewed with the distance of hindsight and a certain dispassion for ecclesial ‘party lines’, this gift which David Jenkins brought to the Durham diocese correlates strikingly with the call for ‘teaching and nurturing’ of fledgling faith made in the Poulton report. Few in the Chester-le-Street church would have appreciated this link back then, such was the suspicion spawned by Jenkins’ media reputation. And yet Jenkins clearly offered to many, in his style of doing theology, an invitation to a deeper, more imaginative, and more robust form of Christian faith. This is the kind of faith which might well have appealed to at least some of those dissatisfied with the diet of worship and theology offered in Area Churches, and so ‘bleeding’ away.

89. Jenkins, *Cuckoo*, p. 53.

90. Jenkins, *Cuckoo*, p. 32.

91. Jenkins, *Cuckoo*, p. 48.

92. Jenkins, *Cuckoo*, p. 48.

If the gap, even 'abyss', as Jenkins had it, between the supposedly conservative and liberal theologies of bishop and church desperately needed bridging through accommodation of each other's missional intention; then the gap in approaches to ecclesiology could also have been spanned by mutual recognition of each other's valuing of evolution and continuity in the institutional Church. Here, it is insightful to re-read David Jenkins' published theology written closest to the time of the Poulton report: *God, Miracle and the Church of England*.⁹³ This was a work reflecting on Church history primarily for the purpose of advocating women's ordination to the priesthood. Within this book, Jenkins broadly attended to the changing and static nature of religious 'organisms and institutions' over time, as bearers of 'tradition'.⁹⁴ For Jenkins, the Bible and Christian history offered ample evidence of how religious institutions might 'betray, distort and well-nigh deny the story' of God's Kingdom, by developing or, indeed, *not* developing, so becoming 'obstacles ... and contradictions to its whole ethos, hope and direction'.⁹⁵ In a dialogue with the work of Alasdair MacIntyre, Jenkins argued for a need to 'finally break out of the notion of tradition as giving us things and directions from the past which ... [are] fixed'.⁹⁶ Instead, institutions which 'bear' a tradition are kept alive by an ongoing argument over themselves; they 'embody continuities of conflict' as MacIntyre famously remarked.⁹⁷ And for Jenkins, such conflict was rightly and necessarily provided in the Church of England by the 'different perspectives, practices, understandings and misunderstandings under God and in God' of people still receiving and contributing to God's story of the Kingdom.⁹⁸

The thrust of Jenkins' argument was naturally about whether women could now be priests, when they had not been in the past. The Church of England was an institution bearing a tradition, yet a past 'pattern' or 'ordering' of the Church did not determine the future Church. Rather, future ordering should 'be worked out dynamically, pragmatically, provisionally and experimentally'. Any demand that a Church's order remain fixed – in this case, insisting that only men should be

93. David Jenkins, *God, Miracle and the Church of England* (London: SCM Press, 1987).

94. Jenkins, *God, Miracle and the Church of England*, pp. 90-110.

95. Jenkins, *God, Miracle and the Church of England*, pp. 92-94.

96. Jenkins, *God, Miracle and the Church of England*, pp. 100-101.

97. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1981), p. 222.

98. Jenkins, *God, Miracle and the Church of England*, p. 103.

ordained – was, for Jenkins ‘inconsistent with the whole pattern and dynamic of the story of the kingdom’.⁹⁹ It was further ‘rendered offensive’ for Jenkins ‘by the overwhelming evidence that the fruit of the Spirit is not in any sort of correlation with the particular ordering of particular churches’.¹⁰⁰

Jenkins mentioned ‘the parochial inheritance’ only briefly and in passing in the course of presenting this engaging argument for an evolving institution.¹⁰¹ Yet, Jenkins’ case for a forward shaping of a tradition-bearing-Church which ordained women could just as well have been applied to debate the ‘pattern’ and ‘ordering’ of the Anglican parish system. Much of what was being attempted in Chester-le-Street in the 1970s and 1980s, and especially the restructured ministerial roles proposed by Poulton, constituted a dynamic, pragmatic, provisional and experimental working out of an alternative parochial, incarnational Anglicanism. It therefore seems a cruel irony that the very bishop who could so imaginatively make the case for an Anglicanism that reached forwards out of conflict over women’s ordination, acted to limit change to the Church’s inherited order in Chester-le-Street parish. Tradition, it seems, was fixed. And whether liberal or conservative, of whichever stripe or sense, Anglicans must surely ask themselves in which future direction the ‘overwhelming evidence’ of ‘the fruit of the Spirit’ might have pointed in the ordering of this particular church.¹⁰²

Conclusion

Fresh from his first visit to Chester-le-Street in November 1985, Canon Poulton remarked plainly and pointedly: ‘The Church of England can ill-afford to ignore and could learn from an experience like this’.¹⁰³ With his untimely death just over a year later, Poulton did not live to see the full extent of the intrigue and antagonism, constriction and persistence, that made up the subsequent experience of the Area Churches. This fuller experience, of growth in so many forms, then stalling and falling in various areas, may yet be more costly to ignore. Anglicans divided by church planting and growth agendas today cannot afford to make the same mistakes on a national or international scale that were made at the local level in Durham diocese in the 1980s. A comparable climate of

99. Jenkins, *God, Miracle and the Church of England*, p. 106.

100. Jenkins, *God, Miracle and the Church of England*, p. 106.

101. Jenkins, *God, Miracle and the Church of England*, pp. 89, 108.

102. Jenkins, *God, Miracle and the Church of England*, p. 106.

103. DCRO, EP/CS 6/33, Poulton Report, p. 8.

mistrust between liberals in theology or ecclesiology and conservatives in ecclesiology or theology is arguably at work among those pressing for and pushing against contemporary church planting for church growth. Instead, each side should work to overcome their mistrust of each other's liberalism and conservatism, by recognizing them as valuable for the mutual strengthening and renewal of a Church that seeks (when it thinks about it) both to conserve and to liberate, as it professes to follow a God who conserves and liberates.