A Reflective Practitioner's Methodology
for Emerging Church Research

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Abstract

This article describes and evaluates the methodology of a research project that investigated emerging churches in Melbourne. The research used a linked set of four case studies with mainly qualitative methods; participant-observation, document analysis, interviews of pastors and key leaders, and focus group interviews with participants. The article considers the significant strengths of this approach and some limitations. The insights of the researcher as a reflective practitioner, and the bias of this sort of insider's perspective, is considered, as is a dilemma that arose after one of the case studies developed internal conflict during the data-collection phase. The research also used some quantitative methods – a questionnaire survey and the 2006 National Church Life Survey – but with limited useful results. The research concluded that emerging churches can be categorised as 'learning organisations' drawing on Peter Senge, and that they have good strengths to build on and some weaknesses to beware. But apart from the value of the research findings, the project was a useful exercise in learning qualitative research and helped the researcher both renew passion for ministry and learn new leadership skills. This reflection focuses on lessons from the methodology in the hope that it will be useful for other researchers or students of practical theology wanting to understand the dynamics and dilemmas involved in the design and practice of qualitative research.

Starting as a reflective practitioner

The theological manuals written by those responsible for the mission of the people of God in the world must be subject to review by the reality of the presence and work of the Spirit through those engaged in "frontline" mission and ministry.

Ray Anderson, *Ministry on the Fireline*[1]

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[1] Ray S Anderson, *Ministry on the Fireline: A Practical Theology for an Empowered Church* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 16.

For six months in the middle of 2006 I collected data as a reflective practitioner on emerging churches. Emerging churches claim they are emerging for a new era with different ways of doing church which engage missionally with their communities and exercise innovation in their expression. This is the rhetoric of Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch's *The Shaping of Things to Come*[2] and generally the reality of the emerging churches in the research project. I had come as an interested participant but also brought a hermeneutic of suspicion to explore what is actually happening in emerging churches. As the location for this research I had chosen my home city of Melbourne. The research focused on a linked set of four in-depth phenomenological case studies in order to investigate and compare the dynamics of emerging churches. I acknowledge the generosity of the four emerging churches in opening up to research. Over the last five years I have reflected on my experience as a reflective practitioner researcher. I submitted the thesis in 2008, graduated and published the monograph in 2009, and have continued my interest in emerging churches and the four case studies.[3] This article describes and reflects back, in hindsight, on my methodology as a reflective practitioner.[4]

The project was shaped by a dual desire to learn firstly about missional leadership and emerging churches and secondly to practice qualitative research and congregational analysis. I spent at least a month in each congregation, learning through participant-observation, document analysis, interviews and focus groups, and limited quantitative surveys. The approach was consistent with a postmodern preference for learning from local expressions rather than grand theories or metanarratives. The objective was to learn not so much from the emerging church as a global movement or theory, but primarily from local and particular expressions of mission and innovation in the four case studies.

The Shaping of Things Now

The Shaping of Things to Come by Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch is an influential book for the emerging church movement, especially in Australia, and it became the basic text for my

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[2] Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st-Century Church* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2003).

[3] Darren Cronshaw, "The Shaping of Things Now: Mission and Innovation in Emerging Churches in Melbourne" (DTheol thesis, MCD, 2009); completed with the help of an Australian Postgraduate Award and supervision by Dr Ross Langmead, and published as *The Shaping of Things Now: Emerging Church Mission and Innovation in 21st Century Melbourne* (Saarbrucken: VDM Verlag, 2009). It is the published version referred to below. These introductory paragraphs draw on pages 225-226. As well as drawing on the thesis methodology and findings, a previous version of this article was presented as 'A Reflective Practitioner's Journey into the Emerging Church Scene in Melbourne', Postgraduate Seminar Paper, Melbourne: Churches of Christ Theological College, MCD (21 February 2008).

[4] Donald A Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (New York: Basic, 1983).

research.[5] Frost and Hirsch argue the need to multiply new missional structures and offer a theological paradigm for emerging churches and stories from around the world of imaginative new expressions of church. There is much to learn from what is happening in emerging churches that is inspired by this sort of literature and theoretical framework. This needs qualitative research and congregational studies that evaluates what is actually happening at a deeper level than the popular literature which contends for new models without necessarily evaluating what new models produce.

Frost and Hirsch's subtitle is *Innovation and Mission for the 21st-Century Church* and they discuss these themes generally from a global and perhaps futurist perspective. The thesis explored, more specifically, forms of innovation and mission in a small group of emerging churches in Melbourne that have started since 2000 – a local and particular present-day perspective. I did not want to write about the ideals but investigate the reality. As Hans Küng suggests, to think of any church as set apart from error and sin would be an 'idealizing misconception' which makes it 'an unreal, distant ideal surrounded by a false halo, rather than a real historical church'.[6] Using categories suggested by Neil Ormerod, Frost and Hirsch present an idealist or supra-cultural ecclesiology of the emerging church movement, albeit drawing on historical examples; whereas I used empirical research to unpack a realist or historical ecclesiology, centred on particular emerging churches.[7] The project dealt, as John Milbank recommends for ecclesiology, 'with the actual genesis of real historical churches, not simply with the imagination of an ecclesial ideal'.[8] Frost and Hirsch do not dwell merely in the world of theory and ideals, but my project had an intentionally local focus to complement and evaluate their overarching teaching for emerging churches. The emerging church literature contends that new models of church are required to reach people in Western society, but are the results matching the rhetoric? What innovation is happening and where is it taking churches in mission? How is 'the shaping of things' now?

The research topic was relevant for church leaders of emerging churches and others interested in understanding and learning from their experience.[9] It involved analysis of church systems and organisational dynamics, and ways churches can relate missionally to contemporary society and Australian culture. Most importantly, the selection of the topic was motivated by a concern to engage fruitfully with people in my ministry context as a pastor and

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[5] Frost and Hirsch, *Shaping of Things to Come*; outlined in Cronshaw, *Shaping Now*, 1-2 and reviewed more fully in chapter 2, pages 36-39.

[6] Hans Küng, *The Church* (Wellwood: Burns & Oates, 1968), 131.

[7] Neil Ormerod, "The Structure of a Systematic Ecclesiology," *Theological Studies* 63(2002), 4-7; Neil Ormerod, "Recent Ecclesiology: A Survey," *Pacifica* 21 (2008), 58-63.

[8] John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 380.

[9] This and the following two paragraphs are from Cronshaw, *Shaping Now*, 11-12, 233.

teacher. My aim was to help churches to engage creatively and thoughtfully with their mission. I came to the task with a commitment to the Church and wanted to help foster fresh expressions of emerging church life. Yet I was conscious the emerging church needs contextual and anthropological understanding and theological critique, towards which I hope the project made a contribution. The exploration of emerging churches aimed to learn about their mission and innovation to borrow from their inspiration for my own ministry and to invite others into a similar process of learning and praxis.

Qualitative research limitations

The research did not test assumptions or hypotheses quantitatively but gathered data about mission and innovation in the emerging churches. The literature suggested mission and innovation are important elements of emerging churches. I wrote some evaluation of the literature and the basis of its missional theology. But the literature was not the focus of the thesis as much as its implications for congregational life. To help my own ministry and emerging churches I sought to understand what was happening in emerging churches. Thus I followed a qualitative research method to document the experiences of mission and innovation in emerging churches.

Qualitative methods are important in practical theology, although there are potential difficulties. First, I was working with a small sample of churches seeking to be relevant to their post-Christendom, postmodern context. Therefore the results would be specific to that group and not necessarily able to be extrapolated to general principles. There would be broader implications from the research but any suggestions or generalisations could not be claimed to be conclusive. Second, the thesis became a historical snapshot of 2006. It naturally includes historical background and some references to 2007-2008 changes, but could not reflect all the ways the case studies have continued to change and develop. A five and/or ten year longitudinal study would be helpful to map how these case studies further develop but this is yet to happen. A thorough evaluation of the case studies and the broader emerging church movement, will be even more appropriate when they have been going for another decade or so. Third, the research could not be expected to yield data adequate to validate or falsify any theories or hypotheses. Fourth, I was associated with emerging churches as a participant, a member of the New Missional Communities group of the Baptist Union of Victoria (BUV), and an employee of Forge Mission Training Network and later BUV. So, as the researcher, I had certain biases about the data which needed to be articulated. In analysing the data, I consciously 'bracketed out' some presuppositions, in order to make allowances for the biases they may contribute to interpretation.

Acknowledging bias

So at the outset I wanted to identify and articulate the presuppositions which I brought to the research task.[10] Working Forge and participating in emerging churches had been a formative influence in my own approach. Thus I inevitably had opinions about emerging churches. It was Edmund Husserl who said that the ideal researcher can 'bracket out' their own experience that is contaminated by culture, history and societal pressure.[11] But Husserl's ideal was unrealistic and alienating from reality. I believed I could value my experience as part of who I was as a reflective practitioner. My insights, experiences and biases help to sharpen me as a research instrument. Philosopher Hans Gadamer argued that preoccupation with objective scientific methods is antithetical to the spirit of human science scholarship.[12] Human research at its best includes participating in human experience and not standing apart from it.

I acknowledged that I brought biases to the research task. I was and still am an involved practitioner with the emerging church scene in Melbourne. The leaders of these particular emerging church case studies are valued friends, as are the Forge founders and staff. The project was an evaluation of the work of these friends and colleagues. Yet they invited my involvement, and in most cases expected some critique, hopefully constructive. I strived not to put friendship with leaders or investment with the emerging church scene ahead of truth-telling. Part of my vocation and hopefully contribution is as a scholar who brings critical perspectives as well as appreciative comments where appropriate. I am a practitioner but hopefully always a reflective practitioner. Whether I maintained sufficient objective perspective is shown in my level of critical comments about where these churches need to grow, alongside my appreciation for the strengths they display.

My practitioner experience and background helped me to enter into and interpret the experience of others. Martin Heidegger suggested that interpretation comes from participation or leaping into the 'hermeneutical circle' of meaning rather than standing outside the circle and analysing existence from an objective, external perspective.[13] Research influenced by the 'new phenomenology' aims at 'putting oneself in the place of the other' in order to see the

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[10] These sections about bias and insider's perspective are drawn from Cronshaw, *Shaping Now*, 13-16.

[11] Edmund Husserl, *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, trans. W R Boyce Gibson (London: Allen & Unwin, 1967); see also Colin James Hunter, "Supervised Theological Field Education: A Phenomenological Enquiry" (DMinStuds thesis, MCD, 2003), 94-104.

[12] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1979), 5-10,235; Max Van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1990), 3.

[13] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1962), 138-154,194,363.

world afresh.[14] I followed this phenomenological approach and sought to understand the experience of emerging churches in Melbourne from the perspective of my background and experience. It would have been misleading to expect complete neutrality and objectivity. Nevertheless, it was appropriate to identify the particularity of my location and its influence on my opinions and judgments.

Insider's perspective

I resonate with Don Browning who commented, 'Most of us stand on the boundary: religious communities attract us; we may even participate in them; but we also wonder if they make sense'.[15] I started my research after finishing in April 2005 as a Baptist pastor in Melbourne's Western suburbs, partly to make sense of my experiences of church leadership and to explore alternatives. I had learned churches are often well established in their traditions, such that innovations are not always welcome or applauded. I had two key questions: 'Is it possible to reshape established churches with emerging missional frameworks and how can this be done successfully?' and 'Is it more fruitful to plant new churches which are mission-shaped from their beginning?'

During my research three formative developments for me were joining an emerging church, working with Forge and starting and then closing an emerging church.

When our family moved in April 2005 for me to commence this research, we joined an emerging church close to our new suburb of Mooroolbark in Melbourne. It formed one of the case studies in the thesis, and as the first congregation to visit served as a pilot study for my methodology. And as the church our family belonged to, I had a particular interest in how I could learn from and contribute to that church.

In July 2005, as I was starting the research, Forge asked me to help liaise with theological colleges. Forge is a mission training network collaborating with colleges, churches and emerging leaders with the aim of developing missionary identity and pioneering leadership skills. As Director of Theological Studies I oversaw Forge's courses, accreditation and assessment. This gave me an insider's perspective into the emerging church movement and an outlet for applying my research findings.

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[14] Michael Crotty, *The Foundations of Social Research: Meaning and Perspective in the Research Process* (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1998), 83-86.

[15] on Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 1.

In January 2007, inspired by what I was learning and after reading Frost's *Exiles*,[16] a group of friends initiated a neighbourhood expression of church: 'Bimbadeen Tribe'. We started with a missional interest in our neighbourhood and school networks, and a desire to celebrate faith and friendship over meals. We hosted fortnightly 'house-church' and on occasion participated in community service and training events. This experiment in 'doing church' was shaped by emerging church inspiration, although also by the rhythms of the New Monasticism.[17] In September 2007 we linked in with another five year old emerging church, another of my four case studies. In May 2008 Tribe stopped meeting although mutually supportive relationships continued.

My research explored emerging churches and leadership training from this 'reflective-practitioner' perspective.[18] My interests and background influenced the questions which guided me. I was not a detached observer but a participant eager to be involved. I was inspired by the way Orlando Costas engaged missiology from the margins, describing a missiologist as a 'thinking missionary', following Winter; and a person of faith caught up in 'the bottlenecks of life', following Verkuyl.[19]

Thus when I approached churches for research, I did so as a practitioner: a Christian, an ordained Baptist pastor, a Forge team member and an emerging church participant. To a large extent this gave me the perspective of an insider rather than outsider, the position of *emic* rather than *etic* ritual criticism.[20] I had not previously visited all the congregations, but neither was worshipping in and talking about church dynamics foreign for me. I did not share the dilemmas of being an outsider which some other researchers of Christian communities have faced.[21] My position as researcher was more like other Christian leaders who studied congregations with whom they had some relationship.[22] The drawback is that I needed to be

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[16] Michael Frost, *Exiles: Living Missionally in a Post-Christian Culture* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2006).

[17] The Rutba House, ed. *School(s) for Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism* (Eugene: Cascade, 2005).

[18] Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner*.

[19] Orlando E Costas, *Christ Outside the Gate: Mission Beyond Christendom* (New York: Orbis, 1982), xiv.

[20] Ronald L Grimes, *Ritual Criticism: Case Studies in its Practice, Essays on Its Theory* (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 1990), 19,cf. 28-62.

[21] E.g., Matthew Guest, ""Alternative" Worship: Challenging the Boundaries of Christian Faith," in *Theorising Faith: The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Ritual*, ed. Elisabeth Arweck and Martin Stringer (Birmingham: University of Birmingham, 2001), 42; Alan Peshkin, "Odd Man Out: The Participant Observer in an Absolutist Setting," *Sociology of Education* 57(1984): 254-263; Melinda Bollar Wagner, "The Study of Religion in American Society," in *Anthropology of Religion: A Handbook*, ed. Stephen D Glazier (Westport: Praeger, 1997), 94-96; Stephen R Warner, *New Wine in Old Wineskins: Evangelicals and Liberals in a Small-Town Church* (Berkeley: University of California, 1988), 74-76.

[22] Jonny Baker, "The Labyrinth: Ritualisation as Strategic Practice in Postmodern Times" (MA Dissertation, King's College, University of London, 2000); Steve Taylor, "A New Way of Being Church: A Case Study Approach to

more careful about bias. But my religious and emerging church participation and associated personal knowledge helped shape my research, and this was part of my methodology.[23]

Methodology

The research strategy was a linked set of case studies of emerging churches in Melbourne.[24] This was a practical theology methodology. It explored the phenomenon and congregational dynamics of emerging churches inductively, starting with the life of four emerging congregations. Postmodernism favours learning from local expressions, distrusting grand schemes which explain the whole of a narrative from a single perspective. Jean-François Lyotard defines this as 'incredulity towards metanarratives', which he says is a defining aspect of postmodernism.[25] True to postmodern form, I looked to inventors of local expressions more than the teaching of experts. Some of the relevant literature on cultural trends was cited, but the focus was to consider appropriate expressions of mission and innovation for contemporary culture through the lens of the experience of particular emerging churches.[26]

Research questions

The qualitative research of the emerging churches focused on mission and innovation.[27] These two categories are important ideals for emerging churches and are the two key categories of Frost and Hirsch's *Shaping*. The question for the research was how much this philosophy was reflected in practice. In other words, did the reality match the rhetoric? The thesis examined the developing emerging church movement in Australia through the life and experience of four selected congregations. It investigated how and whether they were fostering fresh innovation and mission. This was how the thesis thus brought a 'hermeneutic

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Cityside Baptist Church as Christian Faith "Making Do" in a Postmodern World" (PhD thesis, University of Otago, 2004).

[23] Following Taylor, "A New Way of Being Church", 25-26; see James V Spickard, J Shawn Landres, and Meredith B McGuire, *Personal Knowledge and Beyond: Reshaping the Ethnography of Religion* (New York: New York University, 2002).

[24] This section on methodology is drawn from Cronshaw, *Shaping Now*, 16.

[25] Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1984), xxiv-36.

[26] This approach partly followed Steve Taylor who started with the life and liturgy of one selected congregation, Cityside Baptist Church in New Zealand, and inductively explored its 'alternative worship' to understand the wider cultural context. He concluded Cityside's liturgical innovation was a 'making do' in postmodern religious life. Taylor, "A New Way of Being Church", 16,269-273. While Taylor concluded with cultural analysis, my focus was on strategic implications.

[27] This section is drawn from Cronshaw, *Shaping Now*, 16-17.

of suspicion'[28] to the emerging church paradigm, analysed its basic assumptions and engaged in rigorous research to investigate what innovation and mission was occurring.

To state the research task in the form of questions, the thesis sought to explore: What mission and innovation are the churches fostering? What similarities and differences occur in understanding innovation and mission? How are innovation and mission cultivated? How does the theology of mission which emerging churches espouse help foster the mission of participants? What forms does mission take in individuals and congregations? How do emerging churches deal with change management? Do they intentionally build a culture of change which fosters innovativeness? Basically I was questioning: What can others learn from emerging churches, and what do emerging churches need to learn?

With these guiding questions, the research used qualitative research methods to explore the selected emerging churches. Qualitative methods suit research into emerging churches with the sort of questions that I had. The research focused on emerging churches and their processes, little known phenomena, innovative systems and real organisational goals – issues of particular appropriateness for qualitative research. The church-level analyses relied on multiple data sources: in-depth interview of pastors, focus groups of churchgoers, observations and document analysis. These were data-collection methods suited to develop a series of case studies, with the aim of helping those who are leading or teaching churches seeking to be missional and innovative.

Congregational case studies

Initially I identified fifteen churches as a representative sample.[29] I selected churches which self-identified as emerging churches rather than those which might have fitted an *a priori* definition of 'emerging church'. The fifteen churches did not represent all emerging churches but displayed a variety of forms, structures and approaches. However, eight were unavailable or not accessible. The more organic and grassroots groups were either not large enough to research (it was impossible to have the whole church in a focus group and give people the freedom to opt out), or were not as organised or willing to respond to written requests for permission to research. The more organised churches on my list self-selected into the sample by responding efficiently. Of the remaining seven, I focused on four and briefly visited the others.

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[28] Liberation theologians use a 'hermeneutic of suspicion' to question ideologies and subconscious desires that maintain the status quo and promote unjust interests. Juan Luis Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1976), 7-9.

[29] These two paragraphs are drawn from Cronshaw, *Shaping Now*, 18, 232.

The four cases were all in Melbourne's relatively prosperous Eastern suburbs, worship on Sunday mornings and employ their pastors. The similarity among the case studies provided ease of comparison, but less diversity for contrast. They self-identified as emerging churches, but did not represent the breadth of emerging churches in Australia, many of which do not meet in buildings or employ staff. It would be helpful to design research that would be suitable to the more grassroots and organic churches.[30]

Four case studies drawing on participant-observation, document analysis, interviews and focus groups worked well and provided invaluable data. My original plan was to focus on six main case studies. However by the time I had visited and conducted interviews in four churches the transcripts from interviews and focus groups totalled more than 500,000 words. Coding and analysing that amount of data was a daunting project and I was not eager for another 100,000 words or more from an additional church. Moreover, four case studies allowed me to analyse each case study to a significant depth while still offering significant points of comparing and contrasting. Fewer cases would have reduced the points of comparison and therefore the strength of the argument.

The fourth main case study, for various understandable pastoral and ethical reasons, asked to be removed from the project results when it came to be published. This was the biggest research and ethical dilemma as a reflective practitioner researcher, and as such is particularly worth reflecting on. It is easy for research methodology texts to present a positive and ideal picture of how research projects are undertaken, but they can also get messy and relationships enmeshed.[31] This complicated case study was my own church for a year before I started official data collection. On the day I started my official month of observation and interviews, the leading pastor, who had become a personal friend, was suspended from ministry because of unethical issues of ministry practice. I offered to the leadership team to cease my research, but they welcomed my ongoing research and comments. By the time I finished data collection the pastor was stood down permanently. The research thus offered fascinating insights into change management and leadership conflict. I discussed in the thesis valuable lessons of mission and innovation and especially procedures and consultation processes for innovation and change. I also personally learned lessons on the appropriate exercise of power and influence, clarity about church governance and personal accountability for leaders. These may be particular temptations that emerging church leaders face because

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[30] For an overview of other Australian emerging churches see: "2006 Seeding," *Witness: The Voice of Victorian Baptists* 121:08 (2006), 3-20; Darren Cronshaw, "Emerging Churches in Melbourne," *Pointers: Bulletin of the Christian Research Association* 18:4 (2008); Ruth Powell, ed. *Novus: Innovations in Australian Church Life* (2006).

[31] For an appeal for honest and complete discussion of research processes see Frances Ward, "The Messiness of Studying Congregations Using Ethnographic Methods," in *Congregational Studies in the UK: Christianity in a Post-Christian Culture*, ed. Matthew Guest et al (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 129.

of the nature of young innovative churches and the sort of leaders and people they attract.[32] However, the leadership team two years later were uncomfortable with the results being published.

The leaders of the conflicted church felt the research reported both too much and too little about the conflict, and included some errors of reporting. Firstly, the church had moved on and many in the church were not aware of the unethical issues that lay behind the pastor being stood down, and the leaders did not want to revisit that if they read the publication. Secondly, because of the focused scope of the research and out of respect for the pastor and the church, the thesis did not go into detail about the issues of conflict and ethics of ministry that led to the pastor finishing. Although they realised others could learn from their experiences and unfortunate dilemmas, the leaders felt the thesis did not or could not tell the whole story, and so it was best not to describe it in writing at all. Thirdly, there were some errors of description about the church that the leaders, because of their preoccupation with conflict management and succession planning, had not had the time to correct when I finished the research. They acknowledged that I had offered them the opportunity to check the pre-final version of the thesis and invited them to a pastors focus group to discuss my findings, an opportunity pastors from the other case studies took up, but they did not find the time to read the research until two years later when it was almost ready to be published. The pastors and the church had signed off on permission to publish as part of the Human Research Ethics letters, and the pastor who had been stood down was eager for the publication and willing to be transparent about the reasons, but I respected the church's last minute request not to publish and appreciated their careful consideration of the issues.

The four case studies were typical of congregations seeking to be relevant to their post-Christendom, postmodern context.[33] But they still offered a rich mixture of settings, people, programs and approaches that are relevant to each of the two cultural domains – mission and innovation. They were also all 'reputational' cases; two were almost the only congregations in Melbourne from their denominations who identify with the emerging church movement, and the other two were featured at their denominational conferences. Their denominational systems represented them as representative, even 'ideal',[34] instances of emerging churches. Their distinctives are not necessarily generalisable to all emerging churches but they show what is happening in this selection of churches in Melbourne. Each of them was young and were planted or replanted in the first decade of this century. Two were reinvented congregations, one was a fresh church plant and another was a congregational plant within

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[32] Identified as a matter for further research in Cronshaw, *Shaping Now*, 238.

[33] These two paragraphs are drawn from Cronshaw, *Shaping Now*, 8, 18, 21, 226.

[34] Robert B Burns, *Introduction to Research Methods* (Frenchs Forest: Longman, 2000), 465.

an existing church. Using Stuart Murray's terms, two emerged *from* inherited churches, one emerged *out of* inherited church and one emerged *within* a particular context (with some influence out of inherited church).[35]

Others have pursued multi-site emerging church case studies in the United Kingdom and North America.[36] My research set itself in a similar direction in analysing a number of emerging churches in order to explore their congregational dynamics and extrapolate needed future directions. However, it went beyond most of them in analysing the experience of a wide sample of participants – not just leaders – and exploring how they saw mission and innovation. A similar project was Michael Frost's investigation of seven emerging congregations around Australia based on interviews with leaders and surveys of participants.[37] Frost undertook a broader study in terms of the number of churches, but it was not as intensive as my project nor did it involve participant-observation, although it formed a useful comparison. Two Australian Doctor of Ministry students are completing their research in 2012 about their own linked sets of emerging church or related case studies.[38] Others have done ethnographic studies of single churches,[39] but I aimed for a comparative approach to identify patterns across four emerging churches.[40]

Conceptual framework

As I approached the selected congregations and collected and analysed data, I used an explicit conceptual framework to help identify what data to most usefully collect and

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[35] Stuart Murray, *Changing Mission: Learning from the Newer Churches* (London: Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, 2006), 42-43.

[36] E.g. Lois Y Barrett et al, *Treasure in Jay Clars: Patterns in Missional Faithfulness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004); Aaron O Flores, "An Exploration of the Emerging Church in the United States: The Missiological Intent and Potential Implications for the Future" (MA thesis, Vanguard University, 2005); Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006); John Hall, "The Rise of the Youth Congregation and Its Missiological Significance" (PhD thesis, University of Birmingham, 2003); Ian Mobsby, "Emerging and Fresh Expressions of Church: How Are They Authentically Church and Anglican?" (MA dissertation, Anglia Ruskin University, 2006); Bob Whitesel, *Inside the Organic Church: Learning from 12 Emerging Congregations* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2006); Anne Linda Wilkinson-Hayes, "Respecting Communities: Intentional Community as a Model for the Local Church" (MTh thesis, Brunel University, 1997).

[37] Michael Frost, "In a League of Their Own? An Examination and Assessment of the Claims and Practice of the Emerging Church in Australia" (DMin thesis, Australian College of Theology, 2008).
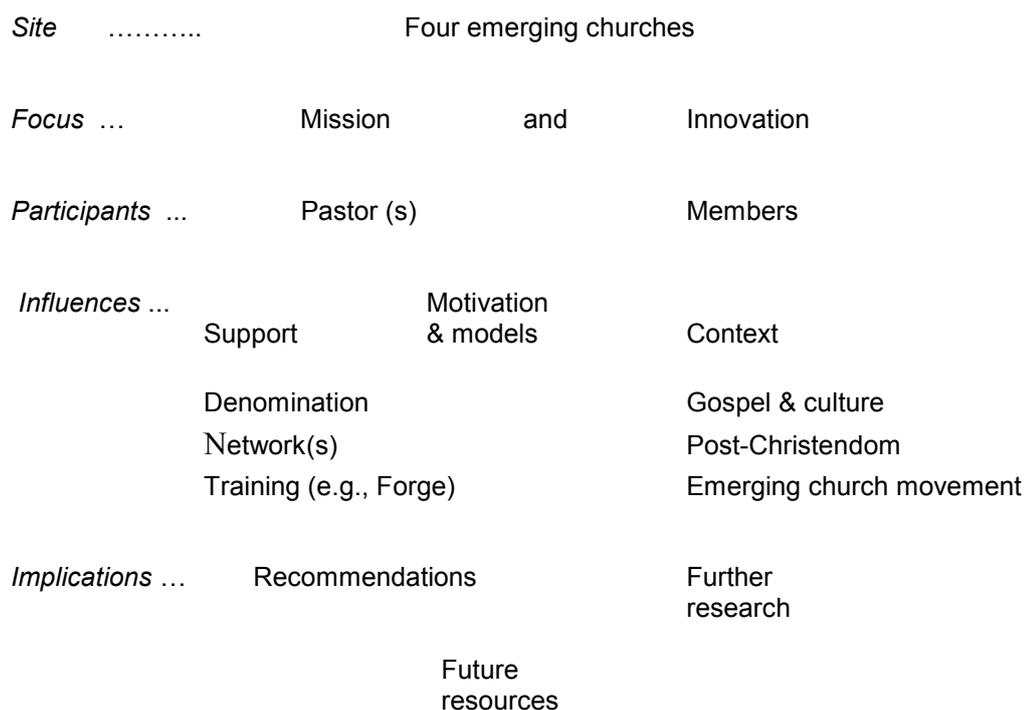
[38] Phil Brown, "Evangelism and Discipleship Making in Emerging Missional Groups and Churches: Key Factors That Impinge on Missional Effectiveness"; Peter Downes, "The Purpose and Significance of the 'Sunday' Corporate Worship Gathering in Australian Vineyard Churches". Both are incomplete Doctor of Ministry theses (Bible College of Victoria, Australian College of Theology, 2011), and being supervised by this writer.

[39] E.g., Gladys Ganiel, "Emerging from the Evangelical Subculture in Northern Ireland: An Analysis of the Zero28 and *Ikon* Community," *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 6:1 (2006), 38-48; Matthew Guest, "Negotiating Community: An Ethnographic Study of an Evangelical Church" (PhD thesis, Lancaster University, 2002); Taylor, "A New Way of Being Church".

[40] R E Herriot and W A Firestone, "Multisite Qualitative Policy Research: Optimizing Description and Generalizability," *Educational Researcher* 12 (1983), 14-19; Colin Robson, *Real World Research: A Resource for Social Scientists and Practitioner-Researchers* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 5,161-164.

analyse.[41] This conceptual structure, in the figure below, helped frame the set of research questions for interviews. It illustrated the relationship between the four emerging churches, the research categories of mission and innovation, pastors and members as participants, various influences, and where the research was pointing with recommendations and ideas for further research and resources.

Figure 1: Conceptual structure of the research

Site ………..		Four emerging churches	
Focus …	Mission	and	Innovation
Participants ...	Pastor (s)		Members
Influences ...	Support	Motivation & models	Context
	Denomination		Gospel & culture
	Network(s)		Post-Christendom
	Training (e.g., Forge)		Emerging church movement
Implications …	Recommendations		Further research
		Future resources	

Data collection

The study began with a critical review of the literature of emerging churches and mission and innovation in a 'post-Christendom' context.[42] Frost and Hirsch are the main spokespeople for emerging churches in Australia and their book *The Shaping of Things to Come* has become an influential text for the movement, and so its categories formed the basis of the literature review. It critically evaluated the dominant frameworks Frost and Hirsch propose for planting experimental new churches among sub-cultural groups throughout the Western world. They understand their historical context as post-Christendom where mission is local as well as global. They espouse an approach to mission that is incarnational in going to people in their networks and 'third places'. For community belonging they advocate a centred-set approach of helping people grow towards Christ. In organisational life they espouse a pioneering and

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[41] Robson, *Real World Research*, 150-152. This section and figure is from Cronshaw, *Shaping Now*, 21-22.

[42] This section is from Cronshaw, *Shaping Now*, 23-24.

apostolic approach to leadership and an organic systems approach drawing on the 'new science'.[43] The review also drew the writings of other missionary practitioners who discuss issues of gospel and culture and the mission of the church in the Western world, from Lesslie Newbigin and David Bosch through to Darrell Guder, Alan Roxburgh, Brian McLaren and other emerging church writers. This overview helped build the contextual framework of chapter two and set the scene for the research.

The study was localised with participant-observation in the churches. I was convinced it was never feasible to try to understand them without observing their culture and activities, and so I spent at least a month at each site to gain in-depth contextual understanding. This gave me time to observe behaviour, attend meetings, collect documents, become familiar with key people and typical activities and map the church's culture.[44] I presented myself as a visitor to worship and as a research student interested in learning about emerging churches. I immersed myself as a research instrument into the world of emerging churches in order to develop a detailed or 'thick' description of their experiences, especially regarding mission and innovation.[45]

The pastors and other key leaders from the churches had in-depth interviews; considered elite interviews. There were at least six and up to thirteen interviews of pastors and key leaders in each church, totalling thirty-six interviews. The pastors gave historical background and analysis of their churches and leadership style.[46]

The process continued with at least two, and up to six, focus-group interviews, totalling fourteen focus groups. In each group three to eight participants, and an average of five, discussed their experience and views of church. A stratified purposeful sample represented a diversity of gender, age and church involvement including position-holders and newcomers. They were selected from personal contact and pastors' recommendations. A questionnaire survey was distributed to identify group composition, prime the thinking of participants and gather insights, although its results were not particularly helpful – I used very little questionnaire results in the final thesis. A guideline of open-ended questions was used to

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[43] Frost and Hirsch, *Shaping of Things to Come*; see also Frost, *Exiles*; Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2006), 24-25; Alan Hirsch and Dave Ferguson, *On the Verge: A Journey into the Apostolic Future of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011); www.theforgottenways.org/.

[44] Catherine Marshall and Gretchen B Rossman, *Designing Qualitative Research*, 3rd edition ed. (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1999), 79-87,106-107.

[45] 'Thick description', as Clifford Geertz described semiotic cultural analysis, goes beyond actions and behaviours to the underlying meaning and symbolic significance. Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," in *The Interpretation of Cultures; Selected Essays*, ed. Clifford Geertz (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 6-7.

[46] See Appendix one; Marshall and Rossman, *Designing Qualitative Research*, 108-114.

encourage people to share a diversity of experiences and stories about the information I was after.[47] The interview and focus group transcripts were especially insightful and showed me the real value of qualitative research, and asking open-ended questions and then listening and learning. A relative advantage of focus groups are that participants can respond with their own thoughts and respond to the contributions of others, although they may refrain from criticism or thoughts that differ from others which is why interviews are sometimes preferable. More interviews than focus groups may have generated more personal reflection and sensitive cultural information. But the focus groups gathered large amounts of data from a wide range of participants and prompted discussion that may not have arisen in interviews.[48]

Letters explained the research and its purpose, methods, demands and outcomes to all invited participants. They had at least ten days to decide whether to participate, and could withdraw any time. Interviews and focus groups were digitally audio-recorded and transcribed by a confidential secretarial service. When individual responses other than pastors were quoted, I used first-name pseudonyms to disguise participants' identity. It was unrealistic to attempt to disguise the identity of the churches and their pastors, and the permission letters made it clear to pastors that they and their churches would be named.

These diverse methods of data gathering helped the data trustworthiness. They offered triangulation by comparing pastors, participants, observations and official documents.[49] Other information sources included my own pastoral and teaching experience and quantitative data from the 2006 National Church Life Survey (NCLS). The NCLS timing was opportune for the research. Unfortunately two of the churches chose not to do the survey but I had data for the other two churches and overall results.

Quantitative limitations

It is noteworthy that the two quantitative data sources were thus disappointing in their results.[50] Firstly, as mentioned above, the questionnaire for interview and focus group participants produced limited useful data. Not all questionnaires were returned. Those returned gave some insights, and hopefully helped prime participants for their responses in interviews. But when I started receiving questionnaires that were not so helpful, and when it

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[47] Analysis of a congregation's stories is the basis of the congregational studies approach of James Hopewell, *Congregations: Stories and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987); and central to the use of appreciative inquiry in congregational change espoused by Mark Lou Branson, *Memories, Hopes and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change* (Herndon: Alban Institute, 2004).

[48] Nancy Tatom Ammerman et al., eds, *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook* (Nashville: Abingdon,1998), 207; Victor Minichiello et al, *In-Depth Interviewing: Principles, Techniques, Analysis* (Melbourne: Longman Cheshire, 1995), 66.

[49] Burns, *Research Methods*, 390,418-420.

[50] This section is adapted from Cronshaw, *Shaping Now*, 233-236.

seemed giving the questionnaire beforehand and asking people to bring it to the interview may have discouraged attendance, I grew less diligent in distributing and following up survey requests with later case studies. The questionnaire was closely adapted from Steve Taylor, who had distributed it to everyone in Cityside Baptist Church, which is a better strategy for getting an overall representation of the church.[51] Frost collected a representative 68 surveys from his 7 churches, which was 19% of the total estimated 350 members.[52] The limited number of questionnaires I collected did not give a substantive or representative picture of the overall composition of the case studies.

A reason the research design did not seek to survey all participants of churches, and the reason I did not persevere to seek a better return, was that I was anticipating quantitative data from the 2006 NCLS. But participation from only two case studies was also disappointing. Taylor used and compared his survey and NCLS data throughout his thesis. My project's limitation to two NCLS surveys added a useful complementary set of quantitative data to the qualitative interviews and focus groups, but the data and potential for comparisons could have been enhanced if all of case studies had engaged NCLS.

The lack of willingness to participate in NCLS by half of my case studies raises the need for more appropriate survey tools. One of the churches was philosophically opposed to the NCLS measurements that they considered focused too much on measurement of Sunday worship and not enough on how believers express their faith in everyday life, and the second church of mainly young adult leaders did not get around to organising to participate. For the sake of evaluating emerging churches and comparing their fruitfulness to other churches, it is important that more emerging churches participate in NCLS 2011 and other future five-yearly NCLS surveys. Emerging churches that are hesitant to be measured according to traditional Sunday measures need measures of how they are expressing mission. Frost used a questionnaire to evaluate the missional engagement of emerging church members, including incarnational mission questions.[53] NCLS is eager to respond to emerging trends and measure the incarnational as well as attractional effectiveness of all Australian churches.[54] NCLS Director Ruth Powell has also started to collect stories of creative mission through new churches in the NCLS 'Innovations Project'.[55] It is important to develop tools that survey and evaluate the mission of the whole people of God. Mission is broader than church on Sunday,

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[51] Taylor, "A New Way of Being Church", 308-315.

[52] Frost, "League of Their Own?", 105-112.

[53] Frost, "League of Their Own?", 80-90,104-116.

[54] Peter Kaldor et al., *Mission under the Microscope: Keys to Effective Sustainable Mission* (Sydney: Openbook, 1995), xvii-51.

[55] Powell, ed. *Novus*; Ruth Powell, "NCLS Innovations Project," www.ncls.org.au/default.aspx?sitemapid=21 .

and we need measurable indicators of effective scattered church life that is quantitative, and not just qualitative – the main focus of my research methodology.

Data analysis

To return to my data collecting and its analysis, a coding process identified key categories and their relationships.[56] NVivo7 qualitative research software was used to code and categorise the data. The process started with a line-by-line analysis of transcripts to identify provisional concepts. The categories were then related to one another conceptually and related to the core research domains of mission and innovation.[57] I was investigating what was actually happening in the churches, and how and to what extent their experience related to mission and innovation. The amount and emphasis of data that was coded to different categories helped to clarify important themes. The themes that participants referred to the most, and/or that I coded, became the main categories to analyse. This coding is partly subjective, reflecting my questions and coding as well as participant perceptions. But it helped to inductively identify four dominant themes for each case study (which became four main headings in each of the four chapters that introduced the case studies in chapters three to six after the introduction and literature review), and it identified the main aspects of mission and of innovation across the case studies (which were discussed in chapters seven to ten of the thesis).

After data collection and initial analysis, a panel of three experts discussed my findings. To help trustworthiness of the findings, I also checked the analysis with peers and research participants. This occurred through follow-up visits to churches, research seminars and asking colleagues and interviewees to read drafts of the findings.[58] There was also a pastors' follow-up focus group. It was important to me to involve community members not just in data collection but in identifying and querying key issues in my analysis. Rather than waiting until research results were finalised and published, I appreciated involving more people in the process of checking and forming initial tentative findings.[59]

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[56] This section is from Cronshaw, *Shaping Now*, 25.

[57] Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 1998), 101-161.

[58] Burns, *Research Methods*, 479.

[59] Abraham A Shumsky, "Cooperation in Action Research: A Rationale," *Journal of Educational Sociology* 30, (December 1956), 180-185.

Evaluation

The study concluded that the four emerging churches were identifiable as 'learning organisations', drawing on Peter Senge's organisational analysis.[60] At their best they were learning to foster incarnational mission, inclusive community, empowering leadership and planned change (the four strengths discussed in each of chapters seven-to-ten). The reality, however, did not always match up to espoused hopes. For instance, the four emerging churches were not reaching as many unchurched people as their ideals suggested and some of decision processes were identified as being haphazard. This gap between ideals and experience provided creative tension that invited ongoing learning about the shaping of missional leadership for twenty-first century churches – the shaping of things now.

This is not to say that emerging churches are not effective or that their innovation is misguided. Mission in the Western world and leading fruitful churches in Melbourne is not easy. Frost and Hirsch and the Forge-inspired churches are pointing in helpful directions for taking church into the community and experimenting with church forms. Hirsch acknowledges we need to get beyond the rhetoric and live out the challenges of incarnational mission, non-dualistic spirituality and innovative leadership:

> I believe that, by and large, as a movement we need to move from rhetoric and missional theory to real action. If we have anything to offer to 21st Century Christianity in this land it must come from our actions. … If we are to have anything helpful to add to the church in the 21st century, we will need to actively model new ways forward.[61]

The research observed the four emerging churches are modelling new ways forward. In some respects they have lessons to learn. But they are still young churches and a thorough evaluation needs to wait another few years. In the meantime, my judgment was that emerging churches merit encouragement to persevere in their initiatives and that Melbourne and the rest of the Western world need more fresh expressions of mission and innovation of the kind displayed in these emerging churches.

The churches were not presented as models to emulate in their particular details but case studies to learn from in their general approach. Each of them had been influenced by Forge Mission Training Network, but is not bound by any Forge model. Emerging churches

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[60] Peter M Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (Sydney: Random House, 1992). I described Senge's frameworks in Cronshaw, *Shaping Now*, 31-34, this paragraph is a summary of my evaluation or abstract from page 227 and the following two paragraphs are from 230-231.

[61] Alan Hirsch, "Who Put the E into EMC?," *Catalyse: Quarterly News and Inspiration from the Forge Mission Training Network* 1:2 (2004), 7.

generally resist the tendency to pursue particular models, preferring to see their approach as a mindset characterised by mission and innovation. Senge similarly warns that great organisations are not built from emulating models with 'best practices', which can lead to piecemeal copying and trying to catch up with what another organisation does.[62] These case studies are not models for others to imitate but examples that may help other congregations live out the gospel in their contexts.[63]

Personal shaping from the research process

'The Shaping of Things Now' was a significant and formative project for me as a researcher and reflective-practitioner.[64] It helped me practice and appreciate qualitative research – I was amazed at the insights and reflection on experience that participants shared and I have realised the value of participant-observation in understanding a group. It renewed my passion for ministry and pastoral leadership. Listening to emerging church leaders and hearing the appreciation of participants for their empowering leadership gave me fresh enthusiasm and helpful frameworks for leadership and congregational mission. And the project introduced me to colleagues and valued friends who enriched not just my research and ministry but my character and family.

One most significant lesson that I have begun to learn as a reflective practitioner of mission studies was to discern what God is doing and shaping in the churches I learned from. Lest human agency eclipse *missio Dei*, the theological truth is that emerging mission and innovation is not limited to clever strategising or timely plans, but part of how God is reforming the way God's people gather and how they influence the world. After seeking to understand emerging churches with qualitative research techniques, it is important to remember that it is God who is shaping things. Darrell Guder reminds us that the church is visible because it is made up of real people, but sociological and organisational frameworks do not explain everything:

> We do not believe, however, that once the sociologist or historian describes a particular church as a fully human, thoroughly sociological organism, there is nothing more to say about it. While the church is always a real, human, social organism, it is also the body of Christ, a community grafted into the life of God in its baptism and by the action of the Holy Spirit. Elements of it are true that are not made visible by the categories and presuppositions of the sociologist,

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[62] Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*, 11.

[63] Craig Van Gelder, "How Missiology Can Help Inform the Conversation About the Missional Church in Context " in *The Missional Church in Context: Helping Congregations Develop Contextual Ministry*, ed. Craig van Gelder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 40-41.

[64] This conclusion draws on Cronshaw, *Shaping Now*, 240-242.

elements that rest deep in its faith and hope in the divine promises on which it was birthed.[65]

There is a deeper truth and mystery that God is at work in the church and in the world. Part of the task of practical theology and mission studies is to discern how God is shaping things now and shaping things to come.

Appendix 1: In-depth semi-structured interview questions

1. What is your history and focus?
    a. Tell me about the history of the church as far as you know it? And yourself and your call here?
    b. How would you describe your church and its focus, values and vision?

2. Tell me about how you understand and express mission? When you think about how your church has related to your community and the world, what do you think has been most important? When you are at your best, how do you express God's love and mercy and justice to others?
    a. Definition: What is your understanding of mission?
    b. Inspiration: What books, leaders or churches helped shape your understanding & practice of mission?
    c. Activities: What does your church do, in terms of mission, which other churches might be able to learn from? What forms does mission take, in lives of individuals? Through the congregation?
    d. Models of mission: incarnational or attractional? Some mission-shaped churches focus on an 'incarnational' approach to mission that takes the ministry to where people are, rather than seeking to attract them to 'church. To what extent can your church's mission be described as 'incarnational'? And how much 'attractional' mission occurs?
    e. Process: How do you teach about mission and how do you mobilise people for mission?
    f. Inspiration: How else could it be encouraged? What is your dream for the mission of this church?

3. Tell me about your innovativeness. What are the most valuable aspects of your congregation's innovation? In innovative approaches, particularly to mission, what has been most significant, most helpful in reaching out beyond the church?

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[65] Darrell L Guder, ed. *The Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 12-13.

a. Inspiration: What books, people or messages helped shape your understanding and practice of innovation and innovative approaches to church?

b. Evidence: What innovation is your church fostering? Have there been things that are new and innovative your church has done, perhaps particularly related to its mission, that you could reflect on and tell me about? What were they and how were the changes introduced and accepted? What is your experience and your church's experience of making decisions about innovation and new ideas? Tell me some specific examples.

c. Process: How does your church deal with management of change and encouraging people to adopt & endorse new ideas and approaches? What frameworks do your church use for presenting and managing change and championing innovative new ideas? What processes (if any) are involved? Are you satisfied with these?

d. Aspiration: How else can it be encouraged? Have you got ideas about how churches can better manage change and promote innovative new approaches to mission?

4. How would you describe your style of leadership? Your leaders' leadership? Don't be humble, this is important information: What are the most valuable ways you contribute to your church's ministry – your personality, your perspectives, your skills, your activities, your character? Give me some examples.

5. Tell me about the culture of the church as an organisation.
   a. If I were a newcomer, what would I need to know to understand how the place ticks?
   b. Do you think your church, to a greater degree than others, attracts people who are innovators?
   c. Does the church intentionally build a culture of change that enhances its innovativeness? How?
   d. What can other churches learn from you and your church about how to lead the church through change and into innovative new approaches to church life and mission?

6. To conclude:
   a. Make three wishes for the future of the church. Describe what the church would look like as these wishes come true.
   b. 'Anything else' question: Thanks for what you have shared. If there were one other thing you would really want to tell me, what might that be?