

Church on the Margins

What does it mean to be a church on the margins?



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Executive summary

Do the main UK Christian denominations adhere to the gospel priority to work with, and alongside, the poorest and most marginalised people in society? Poverty and marginalisation is a reality in the UK for millions of households, and this reality is worsening. Where is the church and where should it be?

Launched in 2020, our Church on the Margins programme has involved qualitative and quantitative research into church closures over the last 10 years, alongside peer learning with church communities in low-income areas in Greater Manchester.

This report outlines our qualitative research findings, based on a series of in-depth conversations with groups of people who are themselves in some way 'on the margins' involved in different forms of church across Greater Manchester over the past two years.

Insights that emerged from these conversations and possible directions for deepened understanding and teaching for theological educations, ministers, leaders (non-ordained and ordained) were part of the focus of the project as a whole.

What might it mean to have a nuanced view of poverty and marginality? How might the church hear from those often voiceless or scapegoats? How can the church be amongst, for, with, in and of the poorer people, places and communities of the UK? How can the church resist easy answers and singular responses? How can the church respond to the question and challenge: who speaks for people with lived experiences of poverty?

At times moving, at times frustrating the voices and stories shared were powerful and insightful. Faith and action were married in all the conversations, with markers of identity being attached to presence, welcome, hospitality and persistence. The joy of gathering in groups is hard to capture. There was something quite special about talking, listening and being heard that may well be the most powerful outcome: better questions, better ears, deeper love as a model possible of replication. The questions remains though: what does it mean to be a church on the margins?

From this report we identified two areas for development. The first related to the challenges expressed by the **participants**, who were the central figures in this conversation, and whose voices expressed clear ideas about the church that was their church. Without developing the ideas, they were expressed in broad strokes.

- Ideas of church as overly rigid, static, Sunday-bound, inflexible and needing challenged
- The need to shift perceptions from identifying places as on the margins to places/geographies, neighbourhoods of hope

- Resources needed and released – people are the primary resource in a place, but are often not empowered, seen as equal participants or offered genuine leadership
- Needing to privilege the voice(s) of those with lived experience, acknowledging and celebrating who they are and the gift they are to the church and the community
- Celebrating contributions, disruptions and interruptions as gift, including affirming the dignity and agency of all people – this includes realising people have inherent dignity, it is not a gift given by outsiders, it exists already in people and place of the margins.
- Developing mutuality and solidarity – that affirmation of your story in the story of others
- Difference to be affirmed and stories told, perspectives shared in ways that resonate but do not conform to rigid structures

Alongside these challenges brought by participants, there was a sense of challenges brought to the **'leaders'**.

- What does power and power sharing look like?
- How is access operating in your congregation?
- Will you stay?
- How will you learn about our place as hopeful and dignified?
- Will you learn from us, as taught by us?
- Can you identify the 'zombie categories' in your congregation and your structures that inhibit transformation, mission, engagement and connection because a structure is in the way?
- What are the obstacles to releasing resource (as money) – identify and remove them
- More importantly, what are the obstacles to releasing people? Identify, and become flexible enough to make a way for local leadership to emerge
- What is your appetite for risk?
- How can you facilitate conversations, mindset changes, opening skills into the life of the church in creative ways?
- How can you help hold the values clearly, but open the conversation about God to all and engage alongside participants/congregants in mission here?

This report is accompanied by a separate publication, *Is the Church losing faith in low-income communities in Greater Manchester?* which features quantitative research findings, based on statistical research on patterns of church closures across Greater Manchester over the last 10 years, case studies and the wider denominational context. Both reports are available for download from www.church-poverty.org.uk/cotm.

1. Introduction

"Oh, how I would like a church that is poor and for the poor." (Pope Francis)

Why this? Why now?

Poverty and marginalisation is a reality in the UK for millions of households. In rural and urban spaces, people without enough food to eat, money to live on, experience social exclusion and negative perception and this reality is worsening. Where is the church and where should it be? According to research conducted in parallel with our research, the place of mainline denominations in proximity or immersed in communities in need has declined over the last decade.

The church's presence may have declined, or may be patchy; economic hardship, though, is a reality for many. In the UK, poverty is acute and the poverty gap growing and poverty increasing,^{1,2} globally nations slide towards levels of poverty that even recently would have been considered impossible.³ People with lived experience of poverty are 'marginalized from effective participation in mainstream economic, social and political life and concentrated into "settlements of the marginal, the socially problematic and welfare-dependent."' ⁴ This is a scandal – dehumanising people who experience economic (or other) marginalisation and poverty, assumptions about their value, worth and purpose are all too common, even in the church.

People's stories and lives are frequently measured through economic engagement, which is a distorted view of humankind. The church's theological life and imagination has something else to say, which should and could offer vision and a new imagination. There need to be reinvigorated understandings of the intrinsic value of all people, and their stories as alive with good meaning and purpose – significant in the world regardless of economic impact. The question and challenge presented by Pope Francis (one could argue building on Jesus!) and later reframed by Niall Cooper, Director of Church Action on Poverty, is this: "Do we really believe that God can be found at the margins; do we really believe in a countercultural church of and for the poor; are we prepared to let go of our own power?"⁵

Responses to poverty and people living in communities of poverty are varied and often appear to be poles apart. Social action or social justice; evangelistic responses or community development; unhelpful dichotomies form. In places, the church has separated acts of service and acts of worship, or has left communities, or has remained with congregations who now drive in as commuters to a congregation's building, once dwellers, now consumers of space. At times, the church has remained present or has reinvested, resourcing new ways of being-in communities identified as in acute need. Some responses to

marginal communities are top-down, either mandated denominationally, based on quantitative and normative hard data⁶, or based on qualitative and descriptive narrated research⁷. Often led by a sincere passion for caring for people in poverty, and a sincere hope that the people of estates or marginal communities would once again populate churches. Some church organisations have sought to save communities through immersive engagement in them, operating as benevolent examples of a better way. Some have moved out entirely to areas where middle-class values and church-life have currency as interchangeable. Poverty and marginality are challenging for the church, no matter the theological persuasion.

In the church, as in the country, poverty is normally perceived from the standpoint of those who are not poor. Tracing its roots through attitudes created in feudal and parish systems, attitudes to poverty emerge in contemporary society as somehow less-than, a shame, a curse, merited or deserved. In a capitalist world, poverty 'draws its meaning primarily from the plight of a flawed consumer.'⁸ The church is influenced by cultural attitudes, and pathologised approaches towards poor people, pejorative judgements, or patronising approaches can all be seen in and amongst the church. It's too easy to speak of 'the poor' as a category – poverty is heterogeneous, with differing causes, responses and realities.

What might it mean to have a nuanced view of poverty and marginality? How might the church hear from those often voiceless or scapegoats? How can the church be amongst, for, with, in and of the poorer people, places and communities of the UK? How can the church resist easy answers and singular responses? How can the church respond to the question and challenge: who speaks for people with lived experiences of poverty?⁹ In fact, how, when, where and in what way do people speak on their own behalf? Bearing witness to how people themselves navigate poverty and marginality in all its complexities¹⁰. Since "[p]eople in poverty may thus constitute a serial collectivity, without necessarily having anything in common other than their poverty and societal reactions to it"¹¹, how does the church align itself with communities of economic poverty, marginality and do so intent on instilling dignity, listening to the voice of those speaking on their own behalf, from their own lives, telling power how church that honours them could, should and must be, navigating inclusion and belonging as integral to church in and for the margins? What might a church on the margins *be*?

These questions have been addressed over years by Church Action on Poverty¹², described

as 'a national ecumenical Christian social justice charity, committed to tackling poverty in the UK', the organisation 'work[s] in partnership with churches and with people in poverty themselves to find solutions to poverty, locally, nationally and globally.' Preoccupied with navigating the church and poverty over decades, more recently alongside policy activism and partnership with research projects, Church Action on Poverty began to explore how to address this very challenge and the Church on the Margins (COTM) project was conceived. This document is a summary of the concept, method, process, encounters and tentative conclusions drawn by the researcher facilitator-team over the last three years. It describes the purposes, explores the challenges, names the encounters, offers the method up for scrutiny, and hears from the voices

of people from marginalised communities who are vibrant participants in the life of the church. Their voices frame every conclusion and springboard into further discussion. Above all, this summary tries not to hide from the challenges we faced and faced by the people who courageously shared their stories with us.

In every session conducted we were clear that we would respect all we were told. Our use of stories shared with us was understood as a gift to be honoured. Any statements used, quotations curated, reflect the permission we sought and were given. The hope of all those who participated in the research by openly describing their experiences relative to the church was that their voices could potentially change the church itself.

What does church on the margins look like?

A story from the Ashton group

Having led worship one Sunday morning and issued the familiar words at the end of the service: "Go in peace to love and serve the Lord", one participant remembers emerging on to the steps of the church where they were meeting for a BBQ, to be greeted by eight homeless men and a couple of women. She said: "They hadn't been to the service, but they were waiting for the BBQ."

Having said to them "Yes, you must come!", she started to wonder what the folks at church would make of this, but she need not have worried. "The majority of people loved it and extended hospitality to them," she beamed. "I've got a photo of me with this gang of homeless people, sitting on the steps eating burgers. And one of them said to me – I love this. This is our church. That day we gathered and worshipped and truly went out to live our love and serve the Lord."

That day we gathered and worshipped

and truly went out to live our love

and serve the Lord

2. The beginning

The vision for exploring Church on the Margins, seeded by Church Action on Poverty, drew heavily from the vision cast by Pope Francis around the Church of the Poor. In reflecting on the Pope's ideas attention turned to the context questions: what might this mean in and for the UK?

In a 2016 report *Church of the Poor? A call to action for churches in the UK*, the case was made for the churches across the UK, irrespective of theological tradition, denominational structure, or geographical location, to focus their collective attention on places, people and churches in places of poverty. Drawing together leaders, thinkers and practitioners from across the UK, in November 2017 the National Poverty Consultation sought to build consensus about what this might look like. Some denominational structures were already engaged in this, and representation from the Church of Scotland with its clear focus on poverty as a priority offered keen insights. How might this look in other places?

Church Action on Poverty conducted a scoping exercise with a number of focus groups in churches and organisations in Manchester, Stoke and Sheffield. These focus groups revealed a need for engagement in the practices, ideas and leadership of 'churches of the poor' within the whole of the UK context (though primarily places in England became the focus). These focus groups migrated the investigations and explorations towards the idea of engaging with the margins as a preferred term, recognising that 'poverty' was understood as relative, contested and potentially negative. The term 'margin' was selected, through extensive discussions in focus groups as an alternative to 'church of the poor' and more suitable in a UK context. In the focus groups the nuances of poverty and marginality began to be drawn out, and of note were the outcomes relating to 'learning.' The insights which in the section on learning emerge in later commentary on the 'Church on the Margins' research and is worth considering here, as a beginning point and indicative of the broad background to the project. The report says of its learning:

- It was difficult to engage churches to take part in the focus groups. Priests/ministers and church-goers were already busy and this seemed like an extra thing to add to their workload. Others were either not interested or didn't understand what we were trying to do.
- It was easier to organise meetings with people who are already church 'activists' (church members or connected with the church), or engaged in community outreach /already engaged with social justice projects, churches of welcome and inclusion.

- The focus groups turned out to be useful exercises in themselves for those who took part. They provided a space for people to think, reflect and to be challenged. We have had positive feedback and a number of churches are keen to engage further.
- We have largely spoken to people in churches where the majority of people are White British. We need to expand our research and work to reach more diverse churches.

With that in mind, Church Action on Poverty worked up a 'concept note' in 2018, which outlined in broad terms the vision that argued for finding ways in a church setting how to have hope and a vision of new life, and persuade the UK's churches to prioritise this vision rather than allowing further decline.¹³ Its optimism was that local and national churches might be part of recovering a sense of call to 'communities who are in poverty.' From this concept a host of activities were outlined, building evidence, establishing a coherent theological voice, suggesting collaboration with others and promotion of the ideas through communication – both of good practice and the underlying vision. Alongside this, there was a sense that networking (both in virtual worlds and in gatherings in three dimensions) would help gather and tell stories, learn alongside others and inspire those already invested in 'Church of the poor.' A focus on forming communities of praxis and base groups who might not only be attentive to the stories and lives, but develop a way of challenging denominations in relation to 'changing their funding and decision-making structures in ways that prioritise the poorest people and communities' (Concept note, Section 5) was critical. It was imperative for Church Action on Poverty's whole approach that the process have integrity in hearing from people for whom this was life, not a job.

This concept note fed into shaping funding bids and ideas around a cohort for research gathering voices from people with clear connections to church and poverty. The language shift from poverty to margins fluctuated, with marginality as the contextual word carrying varied interpretations.

After Church Action on Poverty received funding from the Society of Jesus, Methodist Action on Poverty and Justice and the Sir Halley Stewart Trust, the team at Church Action on Poverty split the focus into a piece of data-based research and peer learning. Appointing co-facilitators, Carmel Murphy Elliot and Deirdre Brower Latz, to support the Church Action on Poverty research lead, Sarah Purcell, and prior to any meeting of the small research team they encountered challenges almost from the inception. Shortly after their appointments, the Global Pandemic emerged and immediately everything came to a halt.

The official launch of the Church on the Margins project was initially delayed and moved online amidst the beginning of lockdown in the UK at the end of March 2020. This meant that any traction around it was diminished and the researchers immediately pivoted to consider how best to approach the project. It had been based so fundamentally around small, gathered communities, that although the team were able to meet online, the Covid Tiered systems made personal, relational and safe intimate spaces for small gatherings nearly impossible. It was time to think again, delay a bit and create some alternative modes of thinking and working.¹⁴

The team (some of whom had not met) did not know each other well. Establishing a mode of communication, meeting and learning from one another was considered vital, though time consuming. Thankful for technology, the team met online and began to think about ways ahead. Later, team meetings in three dimensions became possible and the ideas for collaboration and ways of adjusting the project were discussed robustly. Primarily, there was a core awareness that the fluidity of the external circumstances nationally made the initial proposals almost unworkable, and fixed timelines challenging. The group began to engage and connect with one another in a range of ways.

Throughout 2020 spaces were curated by Church Action on Poverty on Thursdays, which drew people together from a variety of places across the UK. This gave insight into who was doing what and where. A wide group of creative practitioners working with people in lots of ways, from door to door, to food services, outdoor church and phone care, meant that

there was a sense of what the church was doing 'FOR' people. The team benefited from hearing the stories of encounter. Since these meetings were crafted to enable participants to be attentive to one another, reflect and engage with others actively supporting communities during the pandemic, it offered a sense of the importance of reflection and story-telling. This also solidified the sense that alongside the practices of support for those on the margins, consideration of 'church' would be helpful and empowering.

Alongside these meetings the research team also tried to find ways of creatively gathering with people. We considered various options and venues. Initially the team hoped that it could host communities of praxis or small gatherings over three years with a growing momentum and sense of direction. Engaging in research that asked about markers of effective engagement might help the wider church across the denominations understand what journeying towards being and forming churches on the margins might look like.

From its earliest proposals, marred by the interruption of the global pandemic, the project's outcomes were to be related to local congregations and its emphasis and ideas were to influence theological training, formation and development. Rooting research in local communities that heard authentic voices was considered essential. We were encountering the leaders from communities supporting, working, ministering to, with, for and alongside marginalised people. The question was, how to meet with people with lived experience of marginality *themselves*, especially in the light of limited person-to-person connection in the national landscape?

Since these meetings were crafted to enable participants to be attentive to one another, reflect and engage with others actively supporting communities during the pandemic, it offered a sense of the importance of reflection and story-telling

3. Midway findings

In October 2020 a synopsis report was presented to the small focus team working on the Church of the Poor and Church on the Margins conversation. The question and challenge asked by Niall Cooper, 'How does the church get alongside people struggling against poverty, on the margins, so they are not just included but feel that it's their church? Most denominations don't model this' were the heart of the project. A whole host of factors were discussed, and the parallel vision for working with marginalised or asset-rich, income-poor communities gained traction apart from the project.

Factors impacting the research included:

Lead without people of lived perspective

By October 2020 the stark impact of austerity, Covid and decades in which poorer people and their abilities and needs had not been noticed, addressed or met, meant that the national landscape of acute poverty, particularly related to child and family food poverty came under greater scrutiny. The project team had been working to identify a way forward and some participated in a series of events on zoom for leaders – hearing and reflecting on what it meant to be involved as churches in poverty. The breadth of those involved demonstrated creative and innovative ways of engaging with people from the margins as well as more traditional routes of encounter. The conversations and reflections were interesting and challenging, but were also, more often than not, the leaders of congregations or projects, and not often the participants in them.

Renewed focus on margins by churches

Simultaneously a range of churches more prominently expressed their allegiance and focus on the area of poverty. In 2019 the Church of England approved a national estates network strategy¹⁵ and funding for training 50 ministers. Between the appointment of the team and its research, the Methodist Church, a funding partner, published its own report and began its own projects relating to and emphasising the church at the margins.¹⁶ They appointed a leader, Revd Eunice Attwood, and committed significant funding over several years to the emphasis on church at the margins. The question of how the Greater Manchester project and approach would relate to the wider Methodist work was not determined, though key Methodists had been identified as potential research partners in Greater Manchester. This synergy of emphasis was potentially a natural location for exploring the principles of working with, for and amongst marginalised people and researching alongside one another. The overlapping space of research, action, engagement and funding became part of the church landscape.

Clarifying audiences

The approach taken by the Methodists and Anglicans took seriously theological imperatives and the need to create and engage in new approaches. Additionally, both also focussed on training and shared best practice and both emphasise a need to be intentionally engaged in communities of poverty and marginality. As the project continued, a question emerged about how its research findings would go? Who is it for? How will it inform and relate to these other significant church spaces? Will it connect with these mainline denominations and serve their development too?

Significance of peer learning

One of the constant elements of the Church Action on Poverty research was that the primary focus of it was not intended to be the church leaders (other than in receiving reports), nor the church structures (other than hearing the reflections), but instead, a facilitated conversation, with the people with lived experience of poverty (primarily) at the centre. It was intended to be peer learning, not peer support with the clear aims of helping the church become more of who it is called to be.

Language

The interim report from October 2020 made it clear that the project was experiencing key challenges. From the language used (inevitably contested) to the ideas of marginality held by the researchers from various ecclesial perspectives (URC, Catholic, Baptist and Nazarene) the shift from conversation in general to conversation that explored ideas of the language used of 'margins' 'agency' 'dignity' were important. In 2020 the team agreed that:

going forward agreed language will need to be found, so that within the parameters of the project (at least) the team is able to have shared understandings around the language in use. However, since the focus in this project is on lived experience and including and embracing participant and peer led learning, this means that probably we will need to begin to grapple with the 'operant' use of the words – that is, how the participants use or perceive the words. Our experience, however, has revealed that this same process of discovery, unpacking, exploring the language-in-use and thickening its descriptions takes time and repeated conversations. The project itself will need to grapple with the likelihood that participants will need this same type of rich and thorough space and conversation to arrive at some shared contextual use of language. The patience to cultivate shared use means that whatever timeline is agreed, time, elasticity, patient listening and holding lightly to expectations will continue to be important.

The interim space then, was significant, and from its discussion the team arrived at some clear parameters, drawing on the uptake of people willing to meet and on the skills of the facilitators. The team agreed that we would need to engage in:

- Providing a **safe space** for story-telling, for narrating experiences, and for exploring other models discovered through conversations, shared understandings and points of difference will be important.
- The question of inhabiting the spaces and being trusted to share the story, to engage in conversation, and **voicing other perspectives** will be vital.
- **Identifying potential barriers**, affirming their existence but moving towards dreaming spaces will be crucial.
- Creating a 'readership' or **council of reference** that stretches across denominations and theological persuasions will be imperative.
- Reaching a wide group to speak into existing structures and spaces but potentially also

engaging in new groups that stretch across theological persuasions and structures with **commonality found in marginal locations** will enhance the outcomes and their impact.

The interim report also framed stages for action, and this included the strong hope that the mainstream denominations would engage in the process and give access to their congregations identified as marginal. The contexts and personnel (it was hoped) would emerge with the support of the key denominations involved who would broker trusted relationships.

As the team shaped the progression plan for the work, we agreed that the facilitator-observer role offered by Deirdre and Carmel would open up the spaces of conversation well and enable conclusions to be reached alongside the peer groups – nothing said about them without their consent, agreement and affirmation.

What does church on the margins look like?

A story from Brooklands

When recalling how she joined her church, one participant described how she used to pass the church building and think, "That's a weird place... it looks... like a hut and is all fenced off." Nothing about it endeared her to it until, one day, a dear old lady invited her and her mom to go to their 'Diners Club'.

She remembers thinking, "We'd never go to the church, but... we'll go for the food!" Once they got inside, they received such a warm welcome and each week they'd be introduced to more people from the church. She remembers receiving a note of encouragement from one of the women who had befriended her. "No one had ever done that before," she said. It was really special. "Me and Mom were really struggling at the time, and we just enjoyed it so much." One day she turned to her mom and said, "...shall we just go to the church (on Sunday) and give it a try?" And she's been there ever since!

We'd never go to the church, but...

we'll go for the food!

4. Description of the project, parameters and approach

In the initial proposal, prepared and funded before the pandemic began in 2020, the project hoped to focus on a combination of people from marginal communities from within Greater Manchester. Described by the bid as having a quarter of its areas being amongst the most deprived in the country, the focus on the city-region of Greater Manchester as a place of multiple deprivations meant that there were almost certainly churches connected to communities that could be identified as in some way marginalised.

The funding bid outlining the idea of the project stated:

We will work with churches and projects across the whole of Greater Manchester, with a focus on those located in communities experiencing the highest levels of multiple deprivation. Through conversations with local circuits and churches, we will scope and target churches which are delivering the most interesting work in the most deprived areas.¹⁷

Driven by a vision to truly hear from people with lived experience of poverty, the ‘grassroots,’ the team then sought leaders who might give access or introductions to the people who may be willing to be a participant in a cohort considering what it means to be a person in a church on the margins.

Initially, the funding bid had suggested the recruitment and training of facilitators who would build a ‘community of praxis’ in Greater Manchester. These were to be groups that would draw together in reflection and seek to ‘bridge the gap between theory and practice’¹⁸ following Freire who described praxis as “the action of reflection of men [sic] upon their world in order to transform it... Men are not built in silence, but in words, in work, in action-reflection.”¹⁹ The idea of cohorts, the ambition of having multiple cohorts and 30 or so people involved quickly proved to be the greatest challenge faced in the light of the pandemic.

Alongside the facilitation of groups and the voice of lived experience, an experienced researcher from Church Action on Poverty’s core team was tasked with shaping a data-based report relating to the allocation and presence of staff and resources across the denominations within the boundaries of Greater Manchester that are focused on

communities identified by agencies and indicators as deprived. Taking its starting place, a piece of 2016 research by Michael Hirst, that challenged received wisdom about the centrality of caring for deprived communities the Methodists held dear,²⁰ the report will be published alongside this write up.

Joining together the idea of robust research with the stories heard and received from the grassroots participants, the understanding was that the findings would be shared in order to learn together how best to serve in places that are most marginal. The hope was that opportunity would flow to hear and develop a deeper and more fleshed out vision for what it might mean to be engaged in a church ‘of the poor’ or ‘on the margins.’ Insights that emerge from these conversations and possible directions for deepened understanding and teaching for theological educations, ministers, leaders (non-ordained and ordained) were part of the focus of the project as a whole.

Early hopes

Once the news of the pandemic broke, the group immediately focused on how to gather, reset and reframe so that we could begin to think about how to shape a conversation that would enable people – who by their own marginality may not have access to technology, or the ability to use data – to be drawn into conversation. A small group met, drawing together local leaders from Central Manchester, Stockport, South Manchester and Salford who either themselves engaged with people on the margins, or who were understood to be responsible for congregations that were. The group was not a representative group, rather denominational/civic leaders, and Church Action on Poverty researchers, but there was a shared vision for caring for people of the margins, though that phrase created ongoing challenges in every conversation.

These early days of research (noting that no one knew the length, breadth and impact of the pandemic) focussed on conversations primarily with Methodist and Church of England leaders. The leaders were engaged in the conversation, but also wearing many hats. Some were clearly immersed in their own denominational response, personal challenges or political realities at the time. From

the initial group that gathered to meet, only one continued as a participant themselves. One of the others opened access to another leader who became a key contributor in one of the focus groups.

Refining the process

The process was intended to be a cohort-based gathering of people with lived experience of poverty. Initially the challenges were internal – there was a sense of uncertainty about how to shift the conversation, and the facilitating team weren't quite sure how to progress the conversations. Denominational engagement didn't materialise as hoped. The co-facilitators met several times over the months and the slow process of forming a shared-understanding of the language of 'margins', 'church' and the desired approach was painstaking.

In the October 2020 interim report a series of questions were asked and discussed in a subsequent meeting:

1. What does it mean to actively recruit and empower people who are 'marginalised'?
2. Who are the recruiters and what relationship do they have to the research, its focus and intended outcomes?
3. Do people self-identify as marginalised?
 - a. If so, what kind of margins might that reflect?
 - b. If margins are repeatedly explored that are beyond 'poverty' what impact might that have on the purpose of the research?
4. What is the relationship between ideas of 'margins,' marginality, and poverty and what impact does that have on a process of self-selection and then the processes of research?
5. What is the heart of this exploration?
 - a. the **church** on the margins?
 - b. the **participants** who may be (are) **marginalised**?
 - c. newly emerging non-formal ecclesial communities or other potential types of Christian communities (projects with a Christian ethos, for example)?
 - d. all of the above?
6. We asked:
 - a. How will we navigate potential challenges to power, or challenges to current norms and practices?
 - b. What might be gleaned for instruction and improvement of current and future training and development of modes of leadership ?
 - c. How will we pastorally support and engage with the people participating in the research themselves?

Of course, additional questions continued to emerge, but the decision to move ahead in small groups and identify an approach that would create safe, open and freeing conversations about faith in community was taken.

Geographically determinant conversations

Eventually, the focus of research had narrowed to a geographical location: the Borough of Stockport. The impetus for this was the emergence of the Methodist emphasis/report and with support from key Methodist leaders this seemed a logical way forward. However, in keeping with the earliest ideas of the research, we wanted a broadly representative group of Christians from a cross-section of denominations. Key leaders invited to an initial conversation were receptive and challenged the intent of the project as well. The most significant challenge related to what was meant by marginalised. After discussion, we determined that in the eyes of this project, fully accepting other marginality exists, the margins would relate primarily to communities with high resources in people and low-income flow. We recognised that margins were intersectional: economic, sexual, educational background, intellectual ability, class, dementia, isolation, language barriers, refugee status and beyond.

A series of healthy questions and challenges emerged from the group and the report outlines them like this:

- Who is identified as marginalised? Is this the precariat? Or the more empowered working class?
- Should the focus be flipped? Why is the church so middle-class?
- Marginalised classes (e.g. working class) are marginalised by current church structures.
- Institutional assumptions/ ongoing issues of sustainability for the established church (in particular) often further the gap between the marginalised minority and empowered majority.
- What does it mean to be kept outside of the structures? What is the centre? Only then will we know the margin.
- Who is the focus of transformation in this project? The church? Society?
- Is some of the consideration what participation looks like?
- Stockport as a focus – borough and town – including the spiritual renewal of a place that would challenge inequality is positive.
- Openness to learning and a new thing as a possible outcome regarded as beneficial.

Following the rich conversation, the core team met again to consider next steps. The painful and slow process of narrowing the focus, engaging with the ideas of the project and the shifting accountability in the light of the pandemic continued. Slower still was the dawning realisation that after a year and more of activity, the primary hope of engaging with people with lived experience had yet to materialise in large part due to two lockdowns and ongoing restrictions in the UK – alongside reasonable ongoing caution around health.

5. Gatherings with power: leaders and their views

One of the realities that existed was that for the most part the people we met with were either not connected to people who matched the parameters, were not willing to connect the people they were involved with to us, or did not think that the people with lived experience of poverty in their circle of acquaintance would in any way understand themselves as 'church.' This insight was helpful, and spoke profoundly about power and the location and type of 'ministry' people were experiencing. Language of 'client' or 'service user' revealed a particular framework of engagement with people. The conversations between the researchers wrestled with how to progress the whole project with the Methodist and Anglican partners and various attempts were made to find connection points. The experience of these conversations demonstrated that the people leading denominational initiatives were distant from people with lived experience of marginality. The role of gatekeepers as a barrier to our engagement was significant in adding to the difficulties experienced in delivering the aims of the project. It became clear that the formal structures were not set up to enable this kind of engagement. The relational approach would become the opening to the research.

Likewise, the mainstream leaders were (as noted as early as the concept paper) too busy to really connect with either the project or groups. Their roles in leadership meant a limitation on their personal ability to connect with the project. Certainly, each of them leveraged their roles to support the ideas of the project, but it grew evident that their capacity simply would not allow them to mediate the groups. Instead, we drew on them as advocates for the peer learning groups and as influencers with their colleagues and friends to support engagement in it.

After months of trying to gather Methodists and Anglicans from Stockport Borough together the researchers met again (by Zoom) to try and find momentum of some sort. Eventually we agreed that the narrowing by geography without the commitment of the local church leaders had unnecessarily confined us, and that if we were going to be able to conduct the research, we needed to find another way.

People leading denominational initiatives were distant from people with lived experience of marginality ... formal structures were not set up to enable this kind of engagement

In Hirst's report he had noted that some groups had never left urban spaces of poverty.²¹ We eventually drew on connections in primarily non-conformist traditions, contacting a number of leaders from those circles, alongside a URC leader who was known for engagement in poverty. The impact was twofold. First, an immediate uptake of interest in the gathering, and then, a widening of the theological perspectives we would hear from. The mainstream theological engagement was now stretching towards a wider grouping from evangelical to progressive, Catholics and protestants, high church and non-conformists. The perspectives offered then shifted with some of the underlying perspectives of theological shaping, church structure, ministry and ordination understandings all no longer shared. The impact of this meant that peers were listening on multiple levels, and for the facilitators some trust-building and decoding was going to be important.

Having widened the scope, extended the geographical boundary to the sweep of Greater Manchester, and drawn in from a range of denominational backgrounds the small groups that gathered represented the Baptists (Stockport, Partington), Church of England (Brunswick, Hulme, Oldham), Church of the Nazarene (Ashton, Brooklands, Longsight), a Denton Church plant (supported by GCC evangelical), Methodist (Heaton Chapel), URC (Wythenshawe) and a leader from Caritas Shrewsbury. The facilitators worked on the method we would use to enable conversations and pooled ideas, particularly focussing on a method that would be positive, non-threatening, generative of ideas and above all honest.

6. Method

Given the remit of a positive and hope-based approach, drawing on asset not deficit understandings of margins, and aware that it was vital to connect with people where they were, the team settled on a loose appreciative inquiry approach.

We settled on meeting with participants over a series of evenings, giving time to reflect, pray, process and engage, and offering opportunities at each point to stop, pause and draw ideas and themes forward. Meeting over a series of evenings, across several months, interrupted by ongoing lockdowns and illness, the gatherings were shaped around the same broad outline each time. Arrival, food, explanation and agreement around parameters, prayer, and the questions trying to draw out stories. In the first session of each group, we asked for memory to be brought into the room:

Sharing stories of best experiences of being church at the margins

- Several seconds to pause and remember a time in church that brings a smile to your face.
- Several seconds to pause and remember a time in church when you felt the most sense that you belonged and were included.
- Several seconds to pause and recall a time in church or about your church where you felt it drew everyone in and included people at the margins.

Can you describe the last experience to us: where people at the margins were affirmed or included, why do you think that was?

This was followed by:

Sharing what inspired/challenged/resonated etc. in the stories

- Several seconds to review the words and phrases that warmed you when you listened to the stories you've just heard. What stood out?
- Several seconds to review the words and phrases that challenged you when you listened to the stories you've just heard. What stood out?
- Several seconds to review the words and phrases that enthused or inspired you.

From that, the group was drawn towards story and reflection asking:

- We said... We would...
- If we are a church on the margins then we...
- If we belong to a church on the margins then we...
- If we start a church on the margins then we...
- If I led a church on the margins I would...

Which were then drawn together into a summary ending with a framing of the positive.

In the next session, following a reminder of where we had been, we shared stories of some of our dreams and ideas, asking:

- What stands out after a couple of weeks?
- Where did you sense power in an idea?
- What's the most simple thing you heard that you thought 'we could do that' or 'we do that'?
- What's the thing you heard that you thought, 'Oh, imagine if...?'
- Is there anything else you noticed this week?

We shifted then to an implementing phase. We felt that this was vital, so that each participant could take something away and practice it themselves. This was shaped by stating:

Since we are a church on the margins that... [all the sentences above, but made real]

- We WILL...
 - Three small changes this month...
 - Two changes we can make in the next three months...
 - One change we can make in the next year...
 - One small change I can make this month
 - Two changes I can make over the next three months...
 - Three small changes I can be a part of this year...

The power of these gatherings and the spaces they created were distinctive, at points challenging, and inspiring. The hope was that we could glean ideas about what makes Church on the Margins a force for good in the world. What lessons might be drawn on to shape future leaders and people from within the churches who consider themselves to be marginalised for whatever reason?

The power of these gatherings and the spaces they created were distinctive, at points challenging, and inspiring

7. Gatherings of participants

The language that emerged in the gatherings was powerful – and created a definite mood, often laughter, warmth and a sense of commonality emerged from the time together...

'I loved it because I felt like it was just full of hope. ... I felt like a hopeful experience that was just people telling their truth. ... I was really struck by the level of love that was discussed. And yeah, the stories of love and inclusion ... it was powerful. It just really sparked life and lifting at the end of a long day.'

Wythenshawe group

As we stepped into the process there were two directions of thinking – the challenges that emerged in the process itself and as experienced by the 'outside' researchers. Initially, we were acutely aware that for the project to proceed it needed authorisation or mediation by a senior church/civic leader. Without their engagement, we did not have access to people with lived experience of poverty or marginality. The busy-ness of the leaders, their own priorities and lives became a distinct barrier to engagement. So too, the desire to mediate the voices of their groups: "they wouldn't access this".

In the scope of the gatherings there were some distinct areas that emerged, each with a theological imperative attached to it. Initially the ideas were distilled by the facilitator team, who read through the transcripts. Then, we reconnected (after several weeks) with the participants from all the spaces, with many attending again.

From listening to the participant stories, and gleaning from their engagement and reflections a series of ideas emerged and when tested with the participants the concepts were recognisable and shared. Distilled here in categories, 'Experiences of Church as good' and 'Experiences of church as difficult':

1) Experiences of church as good

a) Belonging and participation, inclusion

In all of the conversations language emerged that signified the vitality and power of being a part of a family. The acceptance, hospitality and strong centre that welcomed and ushered others in was powerful.

"It doesn't matter what race you are, how rich you are, or who you are. ... everybody is loved. People don't understand that, when you talk about love, they think that's sappy. No, it's not

sappy, Christ loved everybody, Christ never kicked anybody out. He never refused anybody. It doesn't matter who you are or what you are ... in Christ's eyes we're all the same. Everybody in God's eyes is welcome."

Brunswick 1 group

Speaking of returning to church when coming out of prison:

"This is my Church! That welcome: there's no need to make a big song and dance about it; you've done it, you've served your time and now you're back, get back to making the brews!"

Wythenshawe group

"... I've been in our church. Must be over 45 years. Got brought in children's homes for most of my life after me mum died with social workers and stuff. But the church means a lot to me. But it's not just a church. It's a family I never had. And everybody loves everybody. We all got on well and you look after and you love it. That moves a lot. Someone like me ends on the outside with one or two. But church to me. I've lost without him. It's not just going to judge, it's meeting your family and your friends and you stick by you. If you got any problems, you've always got someone to talk to. And that's fantastic."

Brunswick 1 group

There was a recognisable power in being named, receiving and offering kindness, and the caring received (sometimes unexpectedly) that demonstrated that someone belonged in a place. Alongside this, the cooperative engagement alongside each other in taking decisions (even ones that the group would now change) gave a sense of unity and bonding. At several points the significance of laughter, or of shared moments of incredulity drew people into further conversation. The sessions were punctuated with recognition of the beauty of belonging with each other. There was also a renewed understanding of sacred space. God at work in the ordinary.

"...we just put the bread and the wine on the [coffee] table. Nothing fancy at all. But one day ...we we're [getting] some brews while we were sitting around chatting...And this table, that in some settings would have been, like, super sacred...had just become everyone's table. So they put...keys on it, our friend was changing a nappy there and the dirty nappy went on the table and the crumbs of the pieces of cake...and when we looked at it we

just went WOW. God in the midst of ordinary things”

Wythenshawe group

“When you came here, didn’t you find half a pork pie on the communion table?”

“Yes, it was three quarters actually. People leave all sorts on it”

Wythenshawe group

“... mostly guys, they felt really at home in that space and they had no issues. Talking, sharing, singing, shouting, praying for one another seemed incredibly natural.”

Ashton group

Even in the more serious spaces and conversations, the idea of belonging as attached to shared power emerged. In one conversation the description of belonging was when someone marginalised by their community identity (Iranian and refugee) were asked to join the elders of the church.

“When I move to Stockport, I can say that these ... got me this way that I’m not just an interpreter. The first time I really had this sense, I had this feeling that I belonged to a Church when they invited me to the Deacons meeting so I could say something. It was really great feeling for me because I thought, okay, I’m from another country, I’m a refugee. It looks like I should do some certain things, find the job, paying tax, do this, do that. I can’t be in the decision making.”

Brunswick group

Sharing in power in this way by the original congregation was the greatest step of ‘this is us’ that was achieved. The opportunity to lead as well as receive was important. In one session describing the activities of the church the memory-making of passing out love hearts on the tram was noted as a moment of shared action and behaviour that bonded the group and reminded them of their mission.

The words that leapt out were: story, welcome, hospitality, strong centre/core group, insider family, hospitality, with people, kindness, caring – in passing conversation/moments, food, time, outside walls, participating, singing/worship – unifying, power structures/voice on groups that lead, shaping future, family, language, over time.

In many of the groups, one of the interesting features was time. In Wythenshawe those interviewed had been part of the congregation and the area for decades. In Brooklands, the minister was new, but the local woman, also a minister in the church, was born and bred in the community. In Partington the minister had been there for well over a decade, and the same for Oldham, where the minister was embedded over decades in caring for the place. In other settings the willingness to stick with people was notable, and although several were new to the area they were serving in, quite often

their presence was related to an understanding of embeddedness or a willingness to come to a place and stay, valuing the place for what it is. In some of the groups, the love for place spilled into the area around it, and the power of belonging to the place came out – for many, the leaders were outsider/insiders and so their own place of belonging was gifted to them (or not) by the congregational or geographical neighbourhood.

Interestingly, one conversation related to the perception of the community as ‘marginal’ or looked-down-upon. Several of the dwellers noted that for them the move to Wythenshawe was a move of immense pride – they had come from the back-to-back, outdoor plumbing world of Hulme and Ardwick and the luxury of the homes, the wideness of the streets and the plumbing and conveniences of Wythenshawe was a wonder to them! This sense of pride, love and respect for the community and the importance of staying and working in it for its good was notable – they belonged to the community and the church within it, and it was a good.

“... I think we’ve just thought this is where we live. We want to see the gospel flourish here, and this is where our kids are growing up. So we want it to be a good place for them. And a lot of people speak badly of Partington. They just do. Why would you want to go there? It’s an awful place, but we really love the community here and we’d never want to speak badly of the community. Yes. I think it’s just ‘make a difference’ where you are. Just try to live the gospel where you are, and that’s it really, have a go.”

Partington conversation

b) Sanctuary/safety/free to be/welcome

The willingness to participate in the conversations by the local people, or those who might be considered marginalised, was often brokered by a key leader. On the one hand, this is a point of real weakness for the church – if only one person has ultimate authority or permission must be granted, the power and influence of a centralised role becomes paramount. In some cases that is unproblematic, in others, power can distort participation. However, in each conversation the space held by the group became critical. Each time we met we prayed and related ‘protocols’ for the engagement. Creating a place of community, safe-to-speak, non-defensive listening and powerful attention was important. Again, the idea of church as a place where you can be most yourself and bring your gifts and your full story and know that you will be received with open arms emerged as important. The reality is that the conversations we held were brave.

One person described sharing a secret she had kept for over 60 years in church – a great shame for her:

Person 1 But what pricked my ears up about what [she] just told you was when [she] said

she got chicken, chips and caught, everybody laughed. She just stole a blinking postal order. She broke the law. You know... Everybody laughed.

Person 2 They did, didn't they? Nobody judged me.

Person 1 And I'm thinking that story where people could have judged you.

Person 2 Yeah, but they didn't.

Person 1 So there's trust there. That's huge as well.

Person 2 I'm going to tell you something that I've never said.

Wythenshawe group

The participants exposed parts of their journey, how it had moved, shaped, formed, received them and rejected, frustrated and worried them. Creating a place of openness, safety, confidentiality, story-telling, kindness and love were critical. The view from the participants was often that the process itself felt 'good' and positive and that certainly the story-telling around 'smile' created a shared understanding of meaning that was drawn on in later aspects of the conversations.

Alongside safety and rules for engagement even in the conversation an additional reality the faced us was our awareness that the whole idea of 'margin' felt like a slight, or a negative approach to life lived in a place. We took the view that naming that and exploring it within the sessions was also important and attempted to reassure that this was a recognisable outsider's idea of a place, but quite probably not the lived experience for dwellers there.

Within the communities, the discovery of church as a place for people emerged time and again:

"We used to drive past this church and think, oh, that's a weird place, because it looks like so sort of pedestrian and all fenced off. And all we knew was that there was a fantastic pianist. And what happened? It was a lovely old lady who's dying now. And she invited us because she told us about the diners. And so I said, oh, well, we'll go for the food. We would never go to the church. So we started to come for the food. Me and Mom were really struggling at the time and we just enjoyed it so much. I got to know people from church like ... [named four people]. It was just so welcoming and it just happened at the time...

And we just sort of said ruefully to her, shall we go to the Nazarene church? And let's just give it a try.

[Q: So what made you feel like you belong?] What stands out to me is Brenda, who's with the Lord now, was always so, so welcoming and observant and learned so much from her and hadn't been coming very long. And she just wrote me a little card about encouragement. No one's ever done that before."

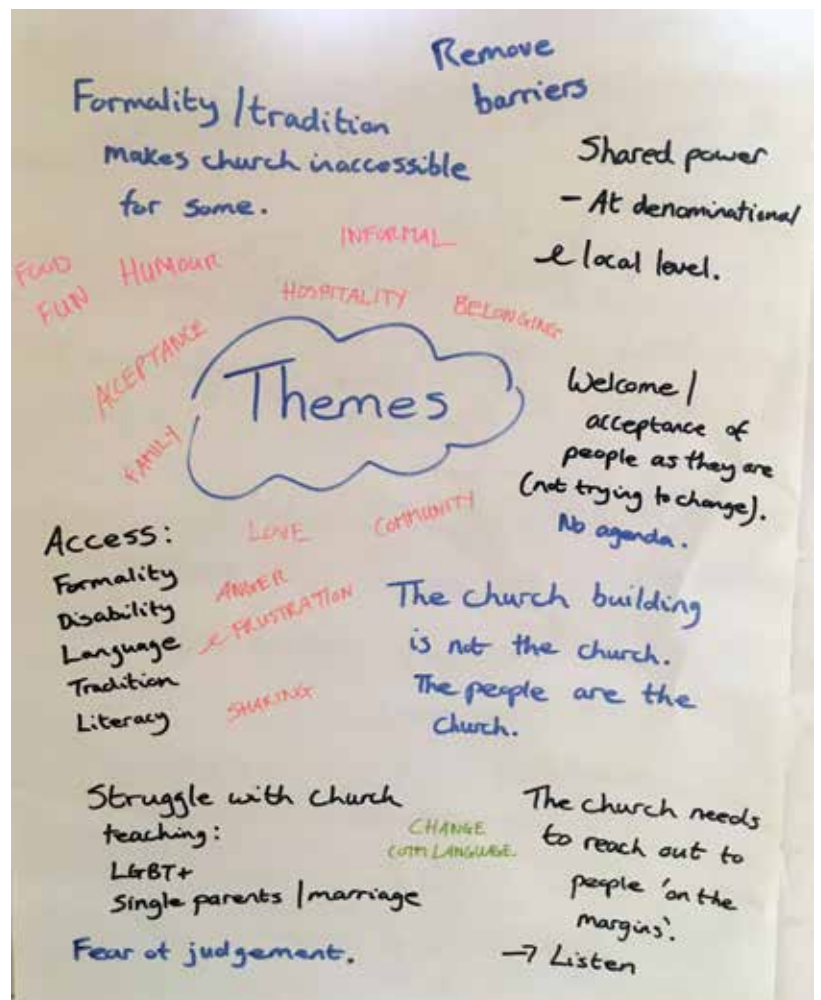
Brooklands group

c) Story telling/memory as energising

Something that leapt out was the joy in meeting. From strangers to friends with a shared focus (food and time) and facilitated conversation. On display were often smiles, laughter, simple stories, bonds, relationships that drew into conversation and built one another up. The 'talking ball' proved popular and helpful, an object that drew attention both away from and to the speaker, and ensured that we could hear well and listen without interruption. The attentiveness shown and the enthusiasm (sometimes tension) of hearing one another's ideas was powerful. In some, the story-telling revealed tensions between the tellers and the wider church or leadership, which was significant. Words were challenged from time to time:

"I have some problem with the definitions, to be honest. When I started coming to the church about the meaning of the church because some people think that church is just that, this building. And you say then you have this feeling that you have been included or excluded or belong to the church. You mean that it's building? No, I don't believe in that. I think church is a community. We can have this community outside or even on the phone or Zoom meeting."

Brunswick group



“So I think it’s our responsibility to get out there and show what church is about. I mean, maybe we need to battle the word church, not say what it is because it is about community. It’s about belonging. And Jesus himself didn’t actually set up a church, did he? He wasn’t sort of like, this is how you do it. In a way, I think that was to allow us all to develop in the ways that we think are right for our own communities, but not to be so focused on this is the one way that we do it.”

Ashton-Under-Lyne group

It was interesting that some ideas provoked defensiveness or expansion of the church. But by and large the spaces created were alive and active. On each occasion food was provided and there was a sense that eating together provided social interaction that drew people into familial ways of being. Talking, eating, drinking, laughing and a social space reflective of normal life was a good way to ask people to reflect on the ordinary stories that shaped their sense of church. Another dynamic that was present, though not necessarily spoken, was the room given for people to unpack what they were saying, including some of their own assumptions or ideas. This emerged most strongly when we were trying to consider the positive of church. What does this idea mean? How simple or complex is it?

d) Sunday and Beyond Sunday: visions of church Sharing Communion; singing; pub; street pastors; food; shared meals; activities of service; ‘Go out and live our love’; BBQ with homeless people; all of these descriptions of church revolved around the living tension: what do we mean by church? Each group expressed ‘Sunday’ gathering as church, discussed building-as-church and determined that ‘church is us’.

In describing an after-Sunday-service BBQ and a group of homeless people joining:

“And when I went outside, I was thinking, what will everybody from church think? And there were some people who said, it is a bit of a cheat, really. They’ve not been to the service. Some had the burgers, and most of them had two. But the majority of people loved it and extended hospitality to them. And they said, ... come and have a picture with us. So I’ve got a photograph of me with this gang of homeless people on the steps eating burgers. And one of them said, **I love this. This is our church. In a way, you could say it was only their church because that’s where they hung out and took their drugs and drank their cans of beer normally, but it was their church just as much as it was my church. That said quite a lot to me.**”

Ashton-Under-Lyne group

And talking about a community where God’s been at work:

“So there’s usually a quarter to a third of the church that aren’t with us on a Sunday. But we

also know that it’s not just about a Sunday. We’ve baptised about 45 people in that time, some of whom have gone on to do amazing things and are no longer living in Partington, some of whom are very much rooted in the church, some of whom have gone on to do less amazing things.”

Partington conversation

Over and again the question of what church is, and what it could be, emerged. Fluid language was used, and often corrected – the church interchangeable with buildings, and with people, and with ideas of ‘going to’, ‘gathering in’ and being. The influence of church-beyond a Sunday and the living witness were described. Each of the groups talked about the places of encounter that were beyond a Sunday.

“I think people don’t mind you talking about God and Jesus and spirituality, the goodness, the kindness, all that sort of. Stuff. It’s when you start talking about the Church, the building and all the memories. And it’s odd. The Church not this building. And that’s what people know now. We say ‘I’m going to the Church building today. I’m going to the Church today and ask how can you be going to the Church? You’re the Church. I’ve got a grandson he’ll say. Are you going to Church on Sunday? Grandma? ... I am not going to Church on Sunday because I am in the Church. I am going to the Church building.’”

Wythenshawe group

2) Experiences of church as difficult

a) Barriers/inaccessible

Before ever meeting the groups there were clear barriers – for the most part, we were reliant on people’s willingness to give time and energy to talking. We were even more reliant on the people who knew people and their willingness to broker relationships. Initially, we were also aware that any travel or dislocation from a home neighbourhood might make it more challenging to get a sense of safety for people, as well as the costs potentially being a barrier. We were conscious too of language, and that the facilitation was by people unknown to the participants, so we were keen to create a format that would allow stories to come to the fore without interpretation or challenge. The expectations of our project were clear, we wanted to hear people speak, their voice given primary place, and their stories cherished. The expectations for the group and of the group needed to be clearly set and a barrier (potentially) was that telling your story demands a level of vulnerability that is very courageous. We also were aware that in many neighbourhoods, groups have had their stories used in an extractive way, or with the heroic figure emerging as the professional leader, rather than the people themselves. We were keen to place emphasis on the experience of the ‘church’ on the margins,

rather than the minister, though in at least two of the groups the church leaders were in the majority (and loved by those they accompanied). It quickly emerged that an additional challenge for the whole process was that much more time would have been helpful. Our hope for two conversations stretched to three in one instance, and in others the gathering could have fruitfully continued.

“I think something that would be helpful would be this ongoing regular conversation every week, maybe every six weeks, maybe once a quarter that sits down and says, what are we trying to do? What are the challenges? What are the barriers?...There [may not be] any answers at the end of it, but there’s something really helpful and awesome about these conversations”

Brooklands group

Although the groups discussed wider intersectional things – disability, literacy, class, language, over and again tensions emerged that implied that the welcome, inclusion and belonging creates a challenge within churches themselves. Widening this to other aspects of access and participation would deepen the discussions around marginality.

“When I was remembering about the ladies at each side of me, I don’t know if we’ve talked about it at the time. What can we learn from this? People can’t see, people can’t read, people can’t hear in our Sunday service, how can we accommodate them so they’re not excluded? That’s our biggest thing, isn’t it, with our congregation? We’ve got several who struggle. So, yeah, it’s what the lessons learned from our memories, from our stories. So how can we help going forward? Do we have to have so many hymns that they’ve never heard before? Do we need hymns, too? No, it’s a difference a lot of the time. We have one with Kate and we’ve seen it several times and we play our instruments with it. And there’s that familiarity. And if there’s anybody new, we can carry them in with it because it’s only a couple of words. So, yeah, I think that’s one way we break barriers.”

Wythenshawe group

However, the journey of church culture from Sunday to participation was explored and highlighted by several:

“I feel like, again, we’re on this kind of journey of a church that there seems to be a culture of the church and the community, and there’s very little overlap between the two. And if there is things that the church do for the community to the community, but we are very much trying to capture, we believe, to be a better understanding of church within the community. And what does it mean to be good neighbours? So there is pushback. There is pushback from people who do have ownership. Right? ... I used that word



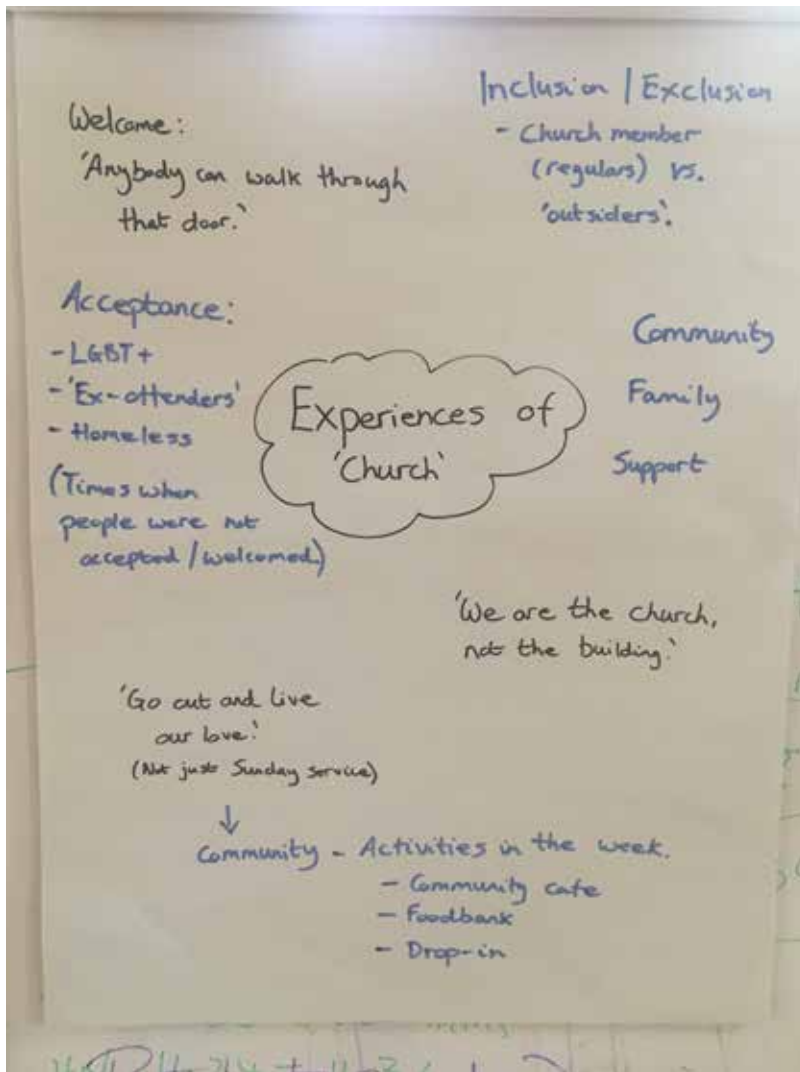
ownership for I want the local people to have ownership, but there are people who have ownership and they’re not open to sharing that sense of ownership as well.

... what we’re finding hard is for people who’ve been here 30, 40, 50 years, some of them have been here from the very beginning. There’s that tremendous feeling of ownership and their personal identity is tied up with the fact that they come to this Church and they’ve come to this Church from the beginning. And there’s been this very sort of perfectionist culture of everything has a certain place, and everything must be very neat and tiny. And that’s contrary to opening it up to the community where people are messy and messed up. And so we’ve got that dichotomy at play.”

Brooklands group

b) Tiring

A repeated idea in several spaces was the unrelenting nature of being perceived and treated as ‘marginal’. This emerged especially in relation to decisions to invest (or not) in the local congregation building, with the sense that there was money to



spare in the system/structure, but not a vision for it to be directed to places of poverty. The patient need to see things unfold, the persistence and faithfulness to a place was conveyed. Interestingly, we didn't explore much to do with the pandemic. The present and historical perspectives were much more present in the conversation than the interruption of Covid. For the leaders, there was also a sense of tiredness in relation to their own cultivation of indigenous leadership from the community to support the structure of 'church.' Then, too, there was church as 'busy' and the leaders as managers.

"...part of that has been saying we're not going to make our diaries as full as they were pre Covid. We're not going to put on as many events, but we do want you all to have more space to connect with people and live Jesus to those people. We've said we want to recapture the prayer life as a congregation because I think probably pre Covid we were busier than we should have been. People's diaries were busier than they should have been. And by the time it got to let's pray at the Church, people were like, I'm too tired.

And it's like if we're too tired to pray, we've messed it up. Haven't we really? We've got to have the energy to pray."

Partington conversation

c) Leadership

There was a sense in many that leadership of the community and types of leadership developed were very real, but not necessarily authorised in relation to the local church. There was, though, a real desire for church to be truly reflective of the local people:

"I'd be really worried if there weren't local new people engaging in church or if local people felt like they couldn't engage in church because it had gone too far in a certain direction, whatever that direction might be. I don't know. I think leadership roles. I'm really cautious that we don't make our leadership roles for people who are like a higher class or a higher income or a higher education. Do you know what I mean? I think we've got to have room. We've got to have room for people who are local representatives of the church and the community and who've been part of it for years. It's part of their story."

Partington conversation

"So again, it's that selfish and we forget that God is at work already despite us instead of us, and is actually inviting us to participate because God thinks we've got a bit of a skill or a bit of experience that we can offer or a bit of ourselves."

Ashton-Under-Lyne group

In response to a question about church priorities: "And we've also said, like, raising up of new and local leaders."

Partington conversation

d) Power tensions

From the outset we experienced some challenges and they revealed tensions in church/with church. Primarily they fell into categories: classical understandings of class, education, power, and patronage, but also understandings of church as people or 'building as church'. The language of 'marginality' felt awkward, and the sense of grappling with that idea in and of itself was present in the room. Of course, everyone instinctively understood it, that was never in doubt, but the idea of it sat uncomfortably. No better language was found, but the loaded meanings and reconfiguring hope for the margins was always going to be necessary. For the facilitators, the tension around those with paid/unpaid roles and the gatekeeping experienced was challenging. So too was the challenge expressed by the leaders about developing leaders, and the pain and frustration of trying to get a local congregation of mostly 'drive in' people to open the doors.

"OK, we're dealing with something. In fact, the piece of artwork, actually, there 90% of people love it. A vocal 10% call it a monstrosity

blessed waste of money. That's that. And the next thing that's something that we do need to confront and deal with. **My guess is that it's got nothing to do with the money, but actually what it represents and what it's trying to capture, and that says a space for the community.** I feel like, again, we're on this kind of journey of a church that there seems to be a culture of the church and the community, and there's very little overlap between the two. And if there is things that the church do for the community, to the community, but we are very much trying to capture, we believe, to be a better understanding of church within the community. And what does it mean to be good neighbours? So there is pushback. There is pushback from people who do have ownership."

Brooklands group (bold ours)

There were tensions about the significance of 'church' and faithfulness – with some describing the building/church as the church of the community in spite of irregular engagement. How do we think of church? How do we understand attachment? What is the worth of people who are occasionally faithful, or who hold a primarily churchless faith?

"When I go out to speak to people, there's zero agenda, I don't intentionally have a thing ... That's where he's directing me to go out and to let them see my faith and then just let God take it from there. I've kind of, like, shown them a little through the door, and then it kind of starts from that. And two experiences. So one was an ex offender. I met him on the street. I didn't actually know he was an ex offender at the time. I met him on the street and he was asking for money. And I'm like the Queen, I don't have money. So I said, well, I'll happily buy you a coffee. And he says, oh, that'd be great. I said, but you have to have it with me. And he looked and I said, I'd like to sit and have a coffee with you. ... And we sat down and we had a really interesting conversation and he said, not many people would take a look at me and want to have a coffee. And I said, Well, I like chatting to people and we got something about what you do. And I said, I'm looking into it. I can understand how we ended up doing some of the stuff that he'd done. And I said, well, for me, if here, God put you in my path for a reason, so that's where God is. And although it might be hard, if you look through your life, even though you perhaps haven't believed, you will have had God moments where perhaps you don't know why you weren't stopped 20 years ago or you don't know why this happened. All that and they're, for me, God moments. But right now, today, when you ask where God is? [God's] here with us over this coffee, because I actually

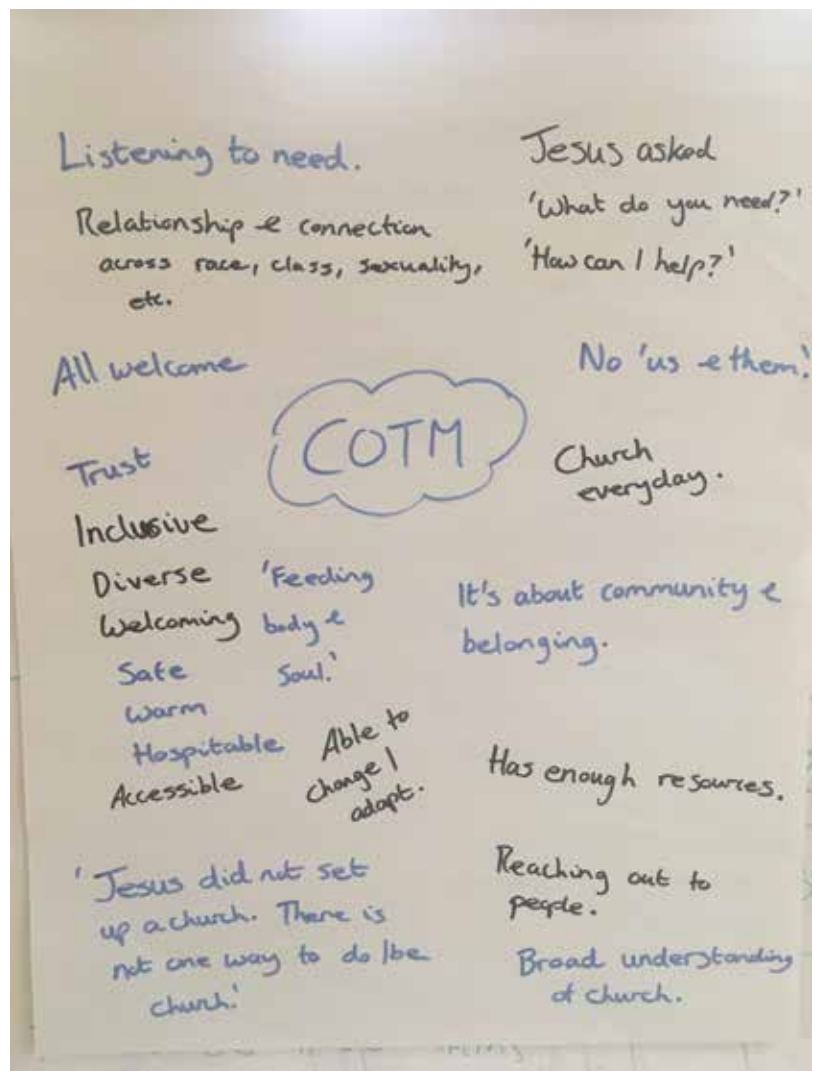
have friends, I have contacts who work with ex-offenders and who will be able to help you. And we've developed quite a nice, I wouldn't say friendship, but we have interaction about where he's on tuning by. And again, I didn't expect that to happen."

... I stand in our church car park from three and I just give out free hot chocolate ... it's great and you're interacting, you're having these moments. But [church people ask] where are they on Sundays? And I sometimes wonder, do some people put too much of an emphasis on, well, where's it leading to? Where's this conversation, where's the result? You've had a moment, you've had a connection, where's the result? Are they in church on a Sunday? Are they giving, are they volunteering at church? Have you had a result? Whereas we've had that connection, we've had a moment, let's leave it now. Let's do what he does best now...

Wythenshawe group

e) Inaccessible or missing people

Additionally, although we tried to engage with diverse communities, wanting to reflect not just



socio-economic inclusion but racial and gender, the overwhelming voices were white, and female, and when people from the British-African-Caribbean community did join, they did not return to the group, although we are not certain of why. In spite of invitations to several leaders from black majority churches, although they expressed willingness to participate, none were able to. Not exclusively, of course, but for the most part the male participants were educated, leaders or Church Action on Poverty team members. People participating were aware of the challenges faced, even to gather. But they were also aware of the challenges even in forming 'ministry to the margins' or the problems of attempting to be a 'church on the margins' and this was expressed in more than one setting. It was noticeable that if we had been willing to engage with people from one congregation alone, without travel, and at a time selected by them, or a space of their own, we may have been able to hear the voices of groups of people, and this is something that should be considered going forward. What conclusions can be drawn about the church?

Are young people, people of diverse ethnicities, intergenerational connections and men missing? Certainly, in the stories told there was a concern by all the participants to want the love of God to be shared with others – without a doubt that emerged time and again, including those traditionally (often) excluded by the church.

In response to a question about God's love: "... It wasn't in a place that you expect. But I'd been asked by my granddaughter if I'd marry her to her partner. And I said yes. And it was in a hotel. I had a long dress on and I welcomed the brides, both in white, looking gorgeous, as they walked up the aisle. And I spoke and we just did the whole thing. And I was so proud and I was so loved on that day and it's bound us together now as well because I've got a great grandson now as well. There's no blood within all that. It's just relationships. And the joy of that day lingers on me. And when we meet, it's part of what binds us together."

Wythenshawe group

What does church on the margins look like?

A story from Wythenshawe

Reflecting on serving an eight-month prison sentence, one participant said, "You spend all the time when you're in prison saying – I want to get home, I want to get home – but when I got home, it was very frightening, I was very anxious because you suddenly think you've got a big tattoo on your head that says I've just come out of prison."

Even though the minister of the church she attended, and many of its members, had visited her while she was in prison, she still felt very nervous about returning to church services. The first Sunday she was home, the minister arranged to pick her up and take her to the evening gathering, and she remembers the dread of walking through the doors.

One of the members she knew was on the other side of the room and, on spotting her, shouted over, "I've put you down on the coffee rota because you've got quite a few to catch up on, and will you see Sheila about the flowers?" All she could do was laugh and think, "This is my church! That welcome: you don't need to make a big song and dance about it; you've done it, you've served your time and now you're back, get back to making the brews."

8. Reflection themes

The desires for this project were initially fairly straightforward. We agreed that we wanted to be intentionally diverse, and the shape this eventually took was in geographical and denominational diversity. This was a pragmatic response to the problems in engaging with people from mainline initiating conversations. The people involved, we hoped, would be immersed in marginal communities – either as dwellers or committed to them through their congregational life. The idea of margins for the purposes of this project was clearly aligned with economic poverty, although we did realise and emphasise that intersectionality is a reality. The question of the character of a church on the margins, as outlined above, leaned heavily towards creating belonging and attentiveness, valuing the other and honouring the community itself. Ideas of power, patronage, abandonment and oppression came to the fore in the course of the conversations with the Church Action on Poverty team: we wondered would these emerge in the groups? Not surprisingly, the participants used their own words, but the language mirrored some markers of belonging and love, kindness and giftedness of the whole community. The story-based learning and listening, we hoped, was itself empowering – giving voice to thoughts and reflections on experiences. If for no other reason than to empower the 25 or so people involved in the conversations, the project succeeded. People telling their story unfolded all kinds of themes that emerged organically, but in concert.

Outcomes

Intended outcomes were explicitly to draw from the experiences and voices heard ways of speaking into the church and its institutions of training for leadership. It seems that an additional outcome might be asking more questions about how to develop training for the people with lived experience of marginality. A theme that became clear was that the tenure and longevity of pastors or leaders is limited, but the people stay. In the course of the project, two of the leaders involved were brand new, two were moving on, and one had just changed church. The people with them, on the other hand, were remainers. How to honour them, invest in them and amplify their voices and leadership skills?

The character of a church on the margins leaned heavily towards creating belonging and attentiveness, valuing the other and honouring the community itself

9. Theological learning

Clearly, theology for Christians gathered in expressions of church of whatever sort, underpins, shapes and flows from the practices of the communities. The themes that emerged were not surprising to the team, who had engaged in deep thinking about the subject prior to engagement in the groups.

Theological themes to be fleshed out

In the voices, areas that came to the fore were...

a) Exploring scripture, and what is 'gospel'

In various ways scripture dripped into the conversations. Most particularly as a reason for engagement, and also as something people could draw on, engage in, reflect and 'preach' from themselves. Co-creative use of scripture that lets people connect immersively with it was powerfully illustrated by the Wythenshawe group who described co-creating the scripture readings and sermons together. The significance of spiritual resources and the ways people had encountered church in the first place was also a lively conversation. The power of scripture to speak and connect with people in many ways and places was a steady emphasis.

"In the church building when I came here 24 years ago was crazy. It was crazy. Full of it. I didn't know [who] Jesus was. And I just got a Bible... And I couldn't stop myself. I was just full of Jesus reading the Bible. And I stop and I read a verse and I say to the girls on this bench, screws [prison guards] and everything, would stop me and say don't do it at work and do it at eating time..."

"Honestly, I don't know why they said she's really out there, because she's just like us. But if something's good, she says, God's good. I love God. She's very vocal about how much of an influence God has been in her life. She's very vocal about the Bible. She's just very passionate about it. And she shares stuff on Facebook about her passion."

Wythenshawe group

b) The priesthood of all

Inclusion in leading, preparing and shaping the worshipping experience of communities was a feature, and the incorporation of local leaders into the life of the congregation was important. This particularly revolved around Sunday worship, but also in involvement in the deacons groups, running activities and participating in determining the direction of groups.

c) The power of the Spirit

Power and empowerment and the nature of helplessness in the light of denominational

structures and expectations emerged, from being excluded from leadership but used extractively for skills, or being involved in new ways and discovering new possibilities. Repeatedly we heard of the dignity of people empowered to lead and serve in clear ways in and beyond a Sunday.

d) One family

Dignity and personhood and the sense of 'family' created around themes of acceptance and participation – being treated normally and encouraged to 'be' oneself emerged repeatedly. The sense that the family of church was both important and real was expressed. So too, the 'relationships not blood' conversation was gripping.

e) 'Church' sacred space and the ordinary life

The sense of creating and crafting real church beyond the walls of the church, or beyond a Sunday morning, or beyond a drive-in church repeatedly came up. Theologically developing what it means to be 'church' and understanding this in a broad sense seemed imperative.

f) Solidarity

Engagement in communities of margins and identification of the margins and being amongst people emerged in almost all the congregations. For some, this was more about the building being a place of service to the community and for others it was going into the community. The differing perspectives about in/out, gathered/sent, reflected (perhaps) traditional understandings and theological frameworks, but the question of 'what does it mean for church to be with people in the margins' arose repeatedly.

g) 'Community of praxis'

The language of 'community of praxis,' or praxis for that matter, didn't make it into the room. But work began to 'reflect [on theory, theology and practical outcomes] among churches engaged in social action in our region; [who would] share and deepen their learning about what it means to be a 'Church of the Poor' in both practical and theological terms; build an evidence base about the church's allocation of resources to the poorest communities; and communicate the stories, ideas and learning to a wider audience in the churches within Greater Manchester and beyond'²². The gathering in the small groups from various congregations demonstrated a power in conversation and was a creative exploration that modelled something of the power of story-telling as the first part of wisdom. The project bid stated that it would hope to 'help a wide array of churches serve God and participate more in the Spirit's work of transforming communities by truly being a church of the poor will unfold over time.' It seems that it occurred, the conversations provoked reaction and interest, and

also served as a reminder to people of the goodness of their current experiences. Sharing good practice also spurred one another on to greater reflection.

h) Stickability

Something that emerges in several settings, is that connection, engagement, wisdom, dwelling, 'Church' in a place where marginality is absorbed, deep commitment to a place matter.

"I would say you've got to be in it for the long haul because success is going to look different to middle-class church and people's lives are going to look a lot more chaotic. And it's probably not as simple, straightforward or black and white in a lot of people's lives. And there are people who have been in and around church for eight or nine years, and we see them a bit, and then they disappear for a bit, and then we see them for a bit, and then they come to faith and then they have a crisis. Then they have another crisis, and then it's like I'd say, have a long term view and be in it for the long haul. I probably also say be really prayerful, be really prayerful about how I spend my time, because there's lots of people with lots of need. And it'd be quite possible to fill my diary trying to make some sort of response to chaotic lives or helping out someone who has a legitimate need. But it's like, is our role to be the person who moves that piece of furniture for a person who can't? And the answer is, actually that might be my role, because if it brings the gospel to that person, it's totally my role."

Partington conversation

"You stay where you are, they will never come. So it's about me, the church going out of the walls into the community. We can bring them in. We can do all sorts of wonderful things. Like [the minister they had] was fantastic at going with you? But it's about relationships and sticking with it."

Wythenshawe group

i) Love

A theme that emerged repeatedly in each group was love and loving kindness. The essence of the gospel, the joy found in being in relationship with God and others came out clearly in the groups.

"We did that once on the trams. [Gave out love hearts]. No, the tram went about three stops and then we're coming back, remember? And nearly everybody accepted. You could see, in fact, very few who said, no, thank you. But mostly everybody just accepted that gift. And once you got over there. Well, that's very nice. It's about like you said, it's about the things that come drilled down from love, isn't it? The kindness, the goodness, the carefulness and all that sort of stuff you show when you know God's love in it."

Wythenshawe group

There was hope and an optimism that love speaks volumes and creates church more than any systematic investment might. The power of love to shape, draw in, create grace, laughter and belonging was repeatedly emphasised. The vision for church of and as family crafted by love was truly compelling.

10. Further thinking and conclusions: where to from here?

The initial project was derailed by the pandemic. The form it has taken has been rich in revealing ideas that emerge from people with lived experience of being 'church on the margins.' The hope of 36-48 churches and projects involved in the research did not (and could not) materialise. The reality of 25ish people involved in exploring what it might mean to be church on the margins was nonetheless powerful. At times moving, at times frustrating the voices and stories shared were powerful and insightful. Faith and action were married in all the conversations, with markers of identity being attached to presence, welcome, hospitality and persistence. The joy of gathering in groups is hard to capture, either on paper or in transcripts, there was something quite special about talking, listening and being heard that may well be the most powerful outcome: better questions, better ears, deeper love as a model possible of replication. The questions remains though: what does it mean to be a church on the margin?

Nestled in hospitality, the idea of gathering to tell stories and shape the future through gleaning themes from the stories told, is powerful. The time required to hear well, to allow authentic reflection to emerge, to lower defences and explore challenges faced demands setting aside of business and normal modes of interruption. Sitting with silence, comfort with tears, and enabling the church's people to speak for themselves about their shared hope for the future is empowering and offers dignity and agency to the speaker.

From this report we identified two areas for development. The first, related to the challenges expressed by the **participants**, who were the central figures in this conversation, and whose voices expressed clear ideas about the church that was their church. Without developing the ideas, they were expressed in broad strokes.

- Leaders, leadership and access to power
- Ideas of church as overly rigid, static, Sunday bound, inflexible and needing challenged
- The need to shift perceptions from identifying places as on the margins to places/geographies, neighbourhoods of hope
- Resources needed and released – people are the primary resource in a place, but are often

not empowered, seen as equal participants or offered genuine leadership

- Needing to privilege the voice(s) of those with lived experience, acknowledging and celebrating who they are and the gift they are to the church and the community
- Celebrating contributions, disruptions and interruptions as gift, including affirming the dignity and agency of all people – this includes realising people have inherent dignity, it is not a gift given by outsiders, it exists already in people and places on the margins.
- Developing mutuality and solidarity – that affirmation of your story in the story of others
- Difference to be affirmed and stories told, perspectives shared in ways that resonate but do not conform to rigid structures

Alongside these challenges brought by participants, there was a sense of challenges brought to the 'leaders'.

- What does power and power sharing look like?
- How is access operating in your congregation?
- Will you stay?
- How will you learn about our place as hopeful and dignified?
- Will you learn from us, as taught by us?
- Can you identify the 'zombie categories' in your congregation and your structures that inhibit transformation, mission, engagement and connection because a structure is in the way?
- What are the obstacles to releasing resource (as money) – identify and remove them
- More importantly, What are the obstacles to releasing people? Identify, and become flexible enough to make a way for local leadership to emerge
- What is your appetite for risk?
- How can you facilitate conversations, mindset changes, opening skills into the life of the church in creative ways?
- How can you help hold the values clearly, but open the conversation about God to all and engage alongside participants/congregants in mission *here*?

For the project to end, seems a shame. The feedback loops are incomplete – all the participants who carried through their engagement (some dropped out or were not able to attend the summary session) were positive about the experience. In the joined together evening that was to conclude the sessions

the sense of unity, joy and connection was palpable. So too is the sense of frustration with 'church.' The feedback from the participants demonstrated that the experience had deepened their appreciation for their own roles in congregations, their understanding of faith and life and their sense of belonging in community. To that end, the project has served a purpose. The original plan, it turns out, interrupted by Covid, may have been deliverable, but certainly in the mutant form we arrived at, we

learned that some of the realities of engagement in research would demand a great deal of time, open-hearted listening and most probably would need to involve good food! The evaluation of our work is still underway, but a greater appreciation that in some ways key to the church on the margins is the people of the margins as leaders, teachers, creatives, liberated to serve and engage in innovative ways steadfastly over time.

What does church on the margins look like?

A story from Brunswick 1

As a refugee, finding places of acceptance and belonging can be difficult, and a warm welcome is not on offer everywhere. So when one participant was invited to go to church, he politely declined. "I wasn't a Christian at the time," he says, so thought, "I won't go there."

However, his wife was keen to try it, and when she returned saying, "This is the best place we can go because everybody is just hugging you, welcoming you," he was persuaded to give it a try. Not only did he receive a warm welcome, but he felt included in ways he'd never imagined possible.

Thinking that only those who work and pay taxes would be able to be involved in the church's decision-making processes, he was really surprised to be invited by the pastor to attend the church meeting so he could say something. "It was a really great feeling for me ... I had this feeling that I belonged."

It was a really great feeling for me...

I had this feeling that I belonged.

Profiles

Ashton-Under-Lyne

A young, new Christian, single parent of three, Anglican, toddler group leader. Her friend, a church planter/leader from Denton, part of Gorton Community Church plant. A Nazarene Minister, American newly arrived in the UK. A long-term Anglican team rector/leader of Street Angels and business chaplain.

Brooklands

A younger minister from the Northern Moor community, grew up in the area from a single parent home, with extreme anxiety as a young person. A minister from the East End of Glasgow, educated to MA level, but working with the church in the community to extend its engagement.

Wythenshawe

A group of women gathered together here. Three of them were friends from one congregation (now URC) and were long-term dwellers in the community. One minister in transition, but a long term leader of the congregation. One community worker, who was also a single parent and had been through the criminal justice system, who identified as being marginalised .

Brunswick 1

This was a group of ministers who each brought one member from their congregation. A refugee who worked professionally in his homeland and served as a translator in the UK, a local man with no education, brought up in care, now in his 70s. A Baptist minister, a Nazarene minister, both educated to MA level.

Brunswick 2

Two local women who were second-generation British people whose parents were from the Windrush generation, Church of England now, though from different church traditions initially. A Church of England priest from a deprived area of Manchester, Hulme and Moss Side, serving in the high Anglo-Catholic tradition.

Partington

A minister/leader who had served there for over a decade. Transitioning the church to a community focussed congregation working on raising leadership up from within. Baptist by tradition. Part-time worker in the church.

Endnotes

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- 5 Liam Purcell and Sarah Purcell editors. *Church of the Poor: A call to action for churches in the UK*. (Salford: Church Action on Poverty, 2016), 3.
- 6 Paul Spicker, *The Idea of Poverty* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2007), 19.
- 7 Spicker, *The Idea*, 19, and Deepa Narayan, et al., *Voices of the Poor: Crying out for Change* and Deepa Narayan, et al., *Can anyone hear us?* (Oxford: OUP/World Bank, 2000).
- 8 Zygmunt Bauman, *Work Consumerism and the New poor* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1998), 1.
- 9 See José Míguez Bonino, “The poor will always be with you’: Can Wesley help us discover how best to serve ‘our poor’ today?” Richard P. Heitzenrater, *The Poor and the People called Methodists* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, Abingdon Press, 2002), 191.
- 10 “Anthony Giddens and Will Hutton in Conversation,” in *On the Edge*, 28. Lister, Seabrook, Tawney, Alcock all support this.
- 11 Lister, *Poverty*, 152.
- 12 www.church-poverty.org.uk Registered charity number 1079986. Company limited by guarantee, registered in England and Wales, number 3780243.
- 13 Concept note, *Church of the Poor? Helping the Church Hear the Cry of the Poor in 21st Century Britain*. (Salford: Church Action on Poverty, unpublished paper, 2018), 2.
- 14 Much of this section is a reworking of summary documents drawn up at the midpoint of the project.
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- 16 www.methodist.org.uk/our-work/our-work-in-britain/evangelism-growth/discover-church-at-the-margins
- 17 See funding bid to Methodist Action on Poverty and Justice.
- 18 MJ Anderson & K Freebody, *Developing Communities of Praxis: Bridging the theory practice divide in teacher education*. McGill Journal of Education / Revue des sciences de l'éducation de McGill, (Vol 47(3), 359–377, 2012), 362. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1014864ar>)
- 19 Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. (London, Penguin, 1970), 75-76.
- 20 Michael Anthony Hirst, *Poverty, Place and Presence : Positioning Methodism in England, 2001 to 2011*. *Theology and Ministry*, (Vol. 4, 4, 14.09.2016), p. 4.1-4.25.
- 21 Michael Hirst, *Poverty, Place and Presence: Positioning Methodism in England, 2001 to 2011* (*Theology and Ministry*, 4, 2016).
- 22 From the funding bid, Ian Rutherford et al

Church on the Margins

What does it mean to be a church on the margins?

Based on in-depth conversations with people and congregations 'on the margins', this report documents frustrations with barriers around disability, literacy, class, language, leadership and power within mainstream churches.

The voices and stories shared are powerful and insightful. They combine faith and a desire for action.