The use of Appreciative Inquiry to change theological understandings of secular work in an Independent Pentecostal church setting.

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Submitted in accordance with the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Ministry

York St John University

School of Humanities

December 2025

The candidate confirms that the work submitted is their own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

Acknowledgements

This study was a collaborative effort involving many individuals, most notably the congregation members who participated in the research and everyone who has since supported the future we have planned together. I am especially grateful to the Learning Hub members, Cherryl, Emi, Evelyn, James, Lauren, Rosie, Sandu, Sharon, and Vicky, whose dedication and enthusiasm made this journey truly meaningful. Thank you to the York St. John Media Training team, whose patience went above and beyond. I also extend my thanks to my Supervisors, Reverend Andrew Village (Professor Emeritus) and Dr Mark Dawson, whose expertise was invaluable. From the very beginning, they believed I had a valuable contribution to make to this area of ministry, encouraged me to persevere, and kept me grounded when life and studies became challenging. Finally, I thank my husband, Glyn, and my sons, Daniel and Samuel, who never complained about the hours I spent in my study, the piles of books and papers that took over our home, or the multiple frozen meals served during the final weeks of writing this thesis.

Abstract

This practical theology study aimed to support members of an Independent Pentecostal (IP) church I pastor in North East England as they explored and expanded their understanding of faith and secular work. The research methodology utilised Appreciative Inquiry (AI), a specific form of collaborative action research, along with reflective elements of Theological Action Research (TAR) and the four voices of theology (Cameron, et al., 2010). This bespoke model was termed 'Appreciating Theology'.

Appreciative conversations took place with 34 church members. Participants shared stories of their past and present experiences of God in their secular work. They were also invited to envision the church of the future, one that would support this vital aspect of their lives. Data were analysed by a Learning Hub comprising the researcher and nine congregation members. Emerging themes were summarised into five affirmation statements: knowing God's purpose, making a difference, God is in my work, growth through peer-to-peer sharing, and the desire for the gathered church to help participants live their scattered lives. From these themes, generative, life-giving attributes were identified and outlined in seven propositions that depict the participants' vision for the future church.

The study illustrates the effective application of AI in an IP church, producing valuable data through storytelling and innovative ideas that shaped participants' attitudes and perceptions of secular work. It gave participants a sense of agency in shaping the church's future and prompted changes in leadership styles, internal decision-making, and church activities, including the Sunday service.

This research contributes to the limited studies on UK IP churches, enhances understanding of faith and secular work, and examines the use of AI within Pentecostal practices. It also responds to two criticisms of AI: its emphasis on positivity and its lack of reflection. The findings provide practical insights for leaders of IP churches.

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List of Abbreviations

AI	Appreciative Inquiry
ARCS	Action Research: Church and Society
DT	Discovery Team
IP	Independent Pentecostal
LH	Learning Hub
LICC	London Institute for Contemporary Christianity
NHS	National Health Service
OD	Organisational Development
PPs	Provocative Propositions
RQ	Research Question
TAR	Theological Action Research
TTT	This Time Tomorrow
UK	United Kingdom
USA	United States of America

Chapter 1: Introduction

This study aimed to assist a specific UK Pentecostal congregation in examining and developing their understanding of faith and 'secular' work. This thesis first explores ideas about work within Christian communities, especially among Pentecostals. It then outlines the Appreciative Inquiry process as a potentially valuable method for altering attitudes towards work within congregations. Lastly, I discuss and evaluate the application of Appreciative Inquiry in the study congregation.

In recent years, the terms 'gathered' and 'scattered' have been used in several Christian denominations to describe the gathered church on a Sunday and the scattered church Monday to Saturday (Scott, 2016; Church of England Lay Leadership Task Group, 2017; Scott, 2018; Hudson, 2019). The suggestion is that the gathered church activities take undue priority over scattered church activities. The Sunday service and other church-related activities can seem very disconnected from the Monday-to-Saturday activities of the congregation, described by Greene (2010) as the 'sacred secular divide'. Scott (2018) describes the scattered church as ambassadors, co-working with God in the world. This suggests that the purpose of any church activities is to equip believers to be the scattered church throughout the week. By fostering a deeper understanding of God's redemptive plan at work in the world, churches can more effectively fulfil their role within it. The focus is whole-life discipleship lived out seven days a week. Greene (2010) argues that most Christians have not been equipped for mission in their daily lives, particularly at work, where they spend significant time. The London Institute for Contemporary Christianity (LICC) Survey 'Apprentice 09' (Care, 2009) reports that 59% of the 2,859 survey respondents found the most challenging context for being a disciple of Christ to be work. At the same time, 62% of those in full-time paid employment experienced little or no help or preparation from the life and ministries of the church to address the issues they faced at work. This survey was pivotal in my desire to explore the issue of secular work in the 'scattered' Christian life in greater depth. As a bivocational church leader in an Independent Pentecostal church, I was both disappointed and unsurprised by these findings. This professional doctorate journey provided me with the opportunity to determine if this view was prevalent in my congregation and, if so, what would be necessary to bring about positive change.

Lesslie Newbigin proposes, "The primary action of the church in the world is the action of its members in their daily work" (2008, p. 51). Work is the area of our scattered lives that takes up many of our waking hours, and for 98% of most congregations (Greene, 2010), that work is viewed as secular. I include work at home, unpaid caring, and volunteer work within my definition of secular work. Work is mentioned at the start of the Bible, demonstrating its importance and fundamental role for humankind and God (Keller,

2012), suggesting that work is part of the divine character; it relates to creation, has a direction and purpose, and offers structure to human lives.

As suggested in the Church of England report *Setting God's People Free* (2017), there is a failure to communicate, realise, and embrace the all-encompassing whole-life discipleship plan that exists for every believer. A shift in culture and practice is needed to unite church leaders and congregation members, fostering an understanding of work that emphasises the worth of every aspect of life and the importance and value of all members of the Body of Christ. I aimed to research work and faith in an Independent Pentecostal (IP) church setting. The aim and objectives of this study were:

Aim: To assist a specific UK Pentecostal congregation in examining and developing their understanding of faith and secular work.

Objectives:

a. Identify strategies for implementing change in attitudes towards secular work.
b. Test the efficacy of such strategies by working with a local congregation.

1.1 Study setting

This study took place within an IP church in North East England, where I serve as one of two Senior Pastors. At the time, the church was a pioneering endeavour that had previously been part of a multi-site church network. It was established in May 2020, just as the COVID-19 pandemic began to affect the UK. The congregation met online due to COVID-19 restrictions and did not meet in person until the end of August 2021. The congregation meets at a hired youth and community centre, which provides many opportunities to work with the local community. The town has a population of 20,419 and lacks a university or nationally significant employment opportunities, yet the congregation is multinational and intergenerational. Formal membership is not required in most IP churches; approximately 50 people (adults & children) regularly attended the church at the time of the study. Currently, attendance ranges between 90 and 100 people, with some members of the congregation travelling over 20 miles to attend the Sunday gathering. An important contextual issue for this study is the lack of exposure to, and engagement with, formal academic research within IP churches. I have never experienced academic research being used to shape or inform ministry practice in my ministry setting. This was particularly significant when planning the methodology, methods, and recruitment of participants to this project. It was possible that there could be suspicion and wariness of academic research, which might be seen to be placing 'worldly rationalism' above lived religious experience. My task was to enable both these things to find a place in an IP church congregation.

1.2 My positionality as a researcher

All researchers bring a certain positionality to research. Some of my positionality seems obvious and is readily reflected in what follows, but I recognise that other perspectives may be hidden and only became clearer as the research progressed, so there was a need to be reflexive throughout the study. As a researcher in this context, I did not aim to be 'off the page' but very much 'on the page', using terminology from Herr & Anderson (2014). I have tried to be very present and aware of my positionality. Herr & Anderson describe a "Continuum of Positionality in Action Research" (2014, pp. 40-41), ranging from insider to outside positionality with six variations on the continuum. Based on this approach, I would describe my own positionality as that of an insider researcher working with others.

I brought to the study my experience as a member of IP churches for over 50 years. I have spent nearly 44 years in various leadership roles on a bi-vocational basis, holding several senior positions at local, regional, and national levels within the NHS and social care, as well as a range of leadership roles within a church context. As a bi-vocational member of a church pastoral leadership team, I have observed various attitudes towards church roles and secular work over the years. Other leaders have asked why I have not resigned from my secular job to pursue a 'higher', church-based calling fully. I have felt disappointed when, during a Sunday service, someone leaving a successful career is celebrated for taking up full-time church ministry, with no recognition of the value of their secular work to God. I have also supported young people who have been deeply disappointed after not securing a paid ministerial role within the church. After completing an internal church leadership programme aimed at promoting service within the church with the goal of achieving the 'ultimate' role of a paid position, they often discover that there are very few paid roles available in IP churches. Alongside their disappointment, there is a cultural message that any other work they do is less significant to God, which reinforces the sacred/secular divide. A solution offered in several Pentecostal churches to those in secular jobs with high incomes is that they form a group of 'Kingdom Builders', who invest their finances into church activities. Whilst this is valuable, it does not address the value of secular work for most of the congregation. An observation from these discussions and experiences is that no one has ever asked congregation members how they feel about this positioning of secular work, or how they might contribute to changing this view. There exists in all churches tacit knowledge among members; that can validate the significance of this insider knowledge and strengthen the connection between practice and theory (Graham, 2013).

As an insider-researcher, I recognise that I bring my own experiences, values, and biases to the study, along with a wealth of personal experience that holds value alongside that of other church members. My own experiences suggest that secular work also serves God. Therefore, I am not simply interested in others'

opinions but also in helping them recognise secular work as God's work. I must maintain a self-critical awareness to ensure my research allows other voices to be heard and does not impose my own agenda on them. My preference is to work with others to shape the future of the church and bring about change; therefore, a collaborative approach was central to my research. I also wanted to find a way to encourage people who had never been involved in research to participate in a manner that was non-threatening, enjoyable, and produced tangible outcomes for those involved. I have experience in action research from service redesign work in the NHS, and eventually decided on a particular form of action research called 'Appreciative Inquiry' (AI) (Cooperrider, et al., 2008) which aligns with my leadership style and approach to my pastoral role.

1.3 Approach to the study

This is a practical theology study exploring the lived experiences of members of the IP church, aligning with the importance of praxis in Pentecostalism. The assertion proposed by Graham (1996) that practice is 'normative', and that new theological insights can be developed from the community of practice, is a key consideration in the approach to this study. The study explores the use of AI in a church context to help a congregation evolve its relationship to secular work. Although this involves listening to their experiences of work and helping them engage with change at a theological rather than purely practical level, this is not primarily about developing new theologies of work. It focuses on applying AI through a theological lens and assessing its usefulness for promoting change within congregations.

1.4 Research questions

I developed the following research questions during a literature review for the taught component of the Professional Doctorate, and through reflection on the chosen research paradigm, as described in Chapter 4: section 4.2.

> RQ1. Can an Appreciative Inquiry approach change attitudes towards, and perceptions of, secular work in a UK Independent Pentecostal church community?
>
> RQ2. Can an Appreciative Inquiry approach to Theological Action Research assist in the co-production of a change in attitudes and beliefs?
>
> RQ3. What are the implications for leaders of Independent Pentecostal churches in leading the gathered church for a scattered life?

1.5 Organisation of the thesis

The thesis is structured as follows: Chapter 1 sets the scene for the study and outlines the contents of the thesis. In Chapter 2, I describe some of the key theological beliefs within Pentecostalism that may influence attitudes towards the secular world and working within it. Chapter 3 provides an overview of Appreciative Inquiry (AI), its roots in constructionism, deployment in various disciplines and common critiques of AI. The aim of Chapter 4 is to demonstrate how the traditional process of AI was integrated with Theological Action Research (TAR) for this study. Chapters 5 to 7 present the findings by following the AI process chronologically and detailing the key insights that emerged. Chapter 8 then reflects on the usefulness of AI as a method in this context. Broader consideration is given to the role of AI in practical theology and the value of integrating TAR into the process. The final conclusions are more specific observations about how much the process has effected change in the congregation so far, and how things might develop from here.

Chapter 2: Theology

In this chapter, I will outline some of the theological ideas that shape Pentecostals' perceptions of secular society. This provides the background to explore how Pentecostals understand vocation, secular work, and the sacred-secular divide.

2.1 Pentecostalism

Pentecostalism was founded just over 100 years ago and has become one of the largest and fastest-growing parts of Christianity (Aldred, 2019). Recognised UK Pentecostal denominations, such as the Assemblies of God Great Britain (Assemblies of God Incorporated, 2023) and Elim (Elim Pentecostal Church, no date), collectively estimate they have over 1,000 churches in multiple locations. Other sources cite that Pentecostal churches in the UK have exploded in the last 20 years, from 2,500 congregations in 2000 to 4,200 by 2020 (Brierley, 2021), with possibly doubling if all Independent Pentecostal (IP) churches are included. It is increasingly recognised that Pentecostalism is pluralised as Pentecostalisms, as there is no single framework into which it fits neatly. The variety of expressions within Pentecostalism reflects its global nature and the distinctions of its beliefs and praxis (Walsh, 2003; Miller & Yamamori, 2007).

Pentecostals have consistently emphasised an experiential approach to Christianity rather than a purely doctrinal one. Biblical narratives are examined through personal testimonies, where “life experiences are valid elements of one’s hermeneutic and theology as much as conceptual theologising” (Warrington, 2008, p. 16). This reflects a praxis-oriented theology. Such an approach was a crucial consideration in this study, which aimed to understand congregants' work experiences and interpret them through a theological lens. The scholarly literature on work experiences and the challenges faced by those from an IP tradition in today's culture is limited, making it a promising area for further research. There are several aspects of Pentecostal theology that are likely to have shaped my congregation's relationship with the secular world, particularly regarding work. These are briefly examined in the following section.

2.1.1 Pentecostal ecclesiology

Pentecostalism recognises both a personal encounter with the Holy Spirit and a collective experience within the church. Land (2010) describes Pentecostal churches as missionary fellowships, emphasising prayer and witness, which informs their mission-driven ecclesiology. This influences both the local context of the church and its broader global mission. This is a vital aspect of the Pentecostal tradition, shaping how

Pentecostal Christians engage with the world, especially in the workplace. Work is often viewed primarily as a means of evangelism rather than as having intrinsic value in itself.

The primary Christological themes in early Pentecostal theology, as outlined by Dayton (1987), are: Jesus as Saviour, Sanctifier, Baptiser of the Holy Spirit, Healer, and Coming King, often referred to as the 'full gospel', remains prominent in many IP Churches, including the one in this study. Vondey (2017, p. 9) described this as "the most consistent theological narrative emerging from the history of Pentecostalism". These themes shape the teachings, faith statements, and ministries of the gathered church, as well as the personal experiences of Christians within a Pentecostal tradition. This is also evident in personal stories of how Jesus and encounters with the Holy Spirit have transformed lives, which were traditionally shared as testimonies during Sunday services. Testimonies are less common in Pentecostal churches now, and when they do occur, they tend to emphasise extraordinary or dramatic Holy Spirit encounters rather than everyday experiences of the Spirit. Kärkkäinen (2001b) suggests that belief in the imminent return of Jesus and the urgency to win others to the faith before this happens may explain the limited emphasis within Pentecostalism on developing an ecclesiological theology.

The way 'mission' is understood in Pentecostal churches is significant, as few would refer to their work, family, community connections, or civil responsibilities as 'mission'. In the early 1970s, in IP churches, mission was exemplified through monthly missionary guest speaker services, culminating in an appeal to the congregation to leave everything and go into the mission field. The meaning of mission has since shifted, and although there are opportunities for short-term mission trips abroad, most missional activities now focus on local evangelism. Quinn & Strickland II (2016) present 'missions' as trips and evangelical activities, but 'mission' as something different, reflecting a much broader purpose and direction, which could be attributed to the mission of God and how this shapes the life of a Christian. There is often a tension in the Pentecostal tradition regarding how secular roles, including work, relate to the missional call of God in an individual's life.

Although Pentecostal ecclesiology is significant, a key challenge for this study was that IP Churches place notable emphasis on the gathered church, prioritising church-centric activities and ministries over encouraging the scattered church to engage with existing community initiatives that often revolve around their daily work or family lives. This will be examined further in the section on social justice, as historically many Pentecostal churches saw their role as helping people by integrating them into the church community and supporting them with their needs. While this is understandable, it can also imply that Christianity becomes limited to a building and risks creating an 'alternative society', thereby reinforcing a sacred-secular divide.

2.1.2 Pentecostal eschatology

The landscape of Pentecostal eschatology is complex, with Balfour (2011) suggesting that there is no single eschatological position within Pentecostalism. I will focus on the relevance of eschatology to this thesis, specifically concerning the relationship between faith and work. Although it is called the 'doctrine of the last things', it has implications for areas of faith much broader than just the end of natural life or the conclusion of the current world and the coming Kingdom of God. Eschatological beliefs influence our outlook on this world and our relationships within it. Historically, they have shaped how Pentecostals view calling, evangelism, the purpose of the Holy Spirit, and how we engage with secular areas such as work, finances, and education.

The most familiar views within the background of the IP church involved in this study are mainly premillennial dispensationalism, with many believing that the one thousand year reign of Christ will take place at the end of the age, God will judge the world and then establish his reign in the world (Althouse, 2010). Premillennial dispensationalism ignited numerous debates about when this 'Rapture' would happen, who would be saved from the Tribulation, and many efforts were made to identify the Antichrist. What this caused in IP churches was a focus on evangelism, aiming to bring people to faith before the Rapture, with many films and songs reflecting this sense of urgency (Van der Laan, 2004).

The pessimism of this eschatological view fostered a lifestyle of escapism (Topf, 2020) because Christians believed the current world was about to be destroyed, which greatly influenced how Pentecostals lived their lives. This eschatological belief, that the earth and everything on it would be destroyed, affected many aspects of societal life. Why would we value our work and see it as part of redeeming the world for God if it is ultimately going to be destroyed? (Balfour, 2011). If our Pentecostal eschatology is confined to the future, then current issues such as unjust structures, power relations, and unfair resource distribution will remain unaddressed. It also falls short of an eschatology that guides our present-day Christian practices, as Yong states: "…eschatological doctrines are not merely beliefs about what will happen in the future, but are also orientations for Christian practice in the present." (2010, p. 252).

There has been a paradigm shift in recent years within Pentecostalism away from a pessimistic view of eschatology towards one of hope, an eschatology of continuity that considers this world part of God's redemptive plan. Theologians such as Barth (2010) and Moltmann (2021) place greater emphasis on the future and the role of Spirit-filled Christians in engaging with the transformation of this world, rather than escapism. There is a stronger focus on bringing about the full work of God that has already begun in the world (Warrington, 2008) and recognising the role of Christians in helping to transform this world into the new

future. This has been further emphasised in the work of Wright (2007), which has sparked somewhat controversial theological thinking among Pentecostals, emphasising biblical hope not as heaven, but as the bodily resurrection and new creation. This alters how the world and everything in it are perceived. The value of work and secular activities becomes sacred when performed as part of God's *Missio Dei* for this world.

The historical focus on the imminent return of Jesus has influenced how Pentecostal communities perceive secular work and careers. From my experience, there remains an unspoken belief that pursuing a career is unnecessary if Jesus is returning soon and that we should avoid becoming too involved with the secular world. There is a common view that Christians are exiles in this world; it is not our true home, and we are on a journey towards a heavenly eternity. As a result, secular work is often regarded as less significant within the spiritual hierarchy. Due to the origins and character of the Pentecostal tradition discussed earlier, especially within an IP context, there are no formal policy documents or public statements addressing this perspective. However, it is evident in the culture we promote—through our celebrations, sermons, and leadership development programmes—that secular work is considered secondary and less spiritual than church work. This underlying ethos influences how a contemporary understanding of work is expressed and positioned within the wider emerging theology of Pentecostalism.

2.1.3 Holiness

Historic roots in holiness and sanctification, strongly influenced by Methodism, with an emphasis on lifestyle and upright, disciplined behaviour (Kay, 2000), have also influenced a separation from the world within Pentecostalism. Within early Pentecostal churches, there were dress codes and behavioural expectations, and congregants were expected to abstain from alcohol, gambling, and entertainment such as cinema, secular music, and dancing. These expectations were widespread in the early 1970s among IP Churches, often accompanied by a fear of being 'left behind' if the Rapture took place while engaging in any of these forbidden activities. This was not only a spiritual stance but also influenced the way Pentecostals viewed the secular world. This presents another perceived reason for viewing work solely as a means to earn a living. Engaging in secular work for any other purpose involves participating in a world from which we should remain separate to maintain a stance of holiness.

2.1.4 Social justice

Considering how Pentecostals engage with the world provides insight into their relationship with worldly matters, whether in work or in issues of social justice. For reasons previously identified in this chapter, there has been a long history of separation from the world. Pentecostal congregations have

historically drawn individuals from poorer backgrounds, the working class, and those in need. Traditionally, the response has been to welcome those in need into the church community and offer support. This hesitance to address social justice issues results in the creation of an alternative community within the church, rather than the church confronting the economic, political, or legal causes of these problems (Kurt, 2024). At one point in Pentecostalism, engagement in social-ethical issues was justified only if souls were saved, owing to the Pentecostal focus on salvation as the conversion of individuals (Wagner, 1981).

In contrast to the early years of Pentecostalism, there has been a significant increase in engagement in social action (Dempster, 1987; Duncan, 2010; Edwards, 2011; Davies, 2019; Cartledge, 2021). The reasons for this include a decline in expectations of Christ's imminent return, cultural pressures to engage in social justice, and a growing belief in eschatological continuity. Miller and Yamamori (2007) describe this increase in social ministry as 'Progressive Pentecostalism'. A shift from a narrow focus on personal salvation to a broader understanding of salvation that includes engaging in social transformation, being good neighbours and citizens, while still maintaining belief in the apocalyptic return of Christ. They suggest this change occurs because some Pentecostal churches now have the resources to develop social programmes and establish partnerships both locally and internationally. This complements the findings of Davies (2019), which describes how megachurches, many of which are Pentecostal, employ a wide range of social engagement strategies, including alleviating poverty in their communities, providing education, training, and skills development, reducing social isolation, and partnering with global charities and ministries. However, there was still hesitancy to engage with the political aspects of social justice, which were seen as complex and risky.

The gathered church serves as a collective voice advocating for truth and justice, but it also nurtures individual Christians who are sent out as the scattered church into their spheres to influence society, speak up for the marginalised, and assist those in need. This can happen in the workplace, within communities, or anywhere the secular world is encountered. Pentecostals historically did not have a written theological discourse, unlike other denominations; therefore, their reasoning regarding the relationship between personal conversion and social justice was not explicit (Kärkkäinen, 2001a). When Catholics and Pentecostals came together in international dialogue commencing in 1972 and lasting many years, according to Kärkkäinen (2001a, p. 423), it became apparent that the two faith streams agreed that "theological evangelization and social justice belong together and cannot be separated". There were several areas of common ground and a deepening of understanding between the denominations that explicitly clarified the Pentecostals' stance on social justice and paved the way for further development of this important topic.

The fundamental drivers of eschatology and evangelism will persist in Pentecostalism and must be understood alongside social justice. How Pentecostals understand this topic offers valuable insights into

secular work. Work is situated within a framework of political and social justice. While smaller Pentecostal churches are starting to engage with the social agenda, I would suggest that there is still a view within Pentecostalism that emphasising social concerns corresponds to a de-emphasis on individual spiritual fervour. Much of Pentecostalism still centres on personal salvation and evangelism rather than involvement in broader political or social issues. Why attempt to make people better citizens on this earth when we are called to make more citizens of heaven? (Warrington, 2008).

2.2 Vocation

Before examining the specific issue of secular work, it is useful to consider the broader concept of 'vocation'[1] and how it is understood within Pentecostalism. To understand current perspectives on vocation within Pentecostalism, it is necessary to revisit its origins, which are deeply rooted in religious tradition (Dawson, 2005). The word vocation derives from the Latin *vocare* 'to call' (Gregg, 2005) and was used to describe a call away from the world of industrious activity to dedicate oneself to prayer and contemplation (Dawson, 2005). We see its earliest use connected to the sacred Christian monastic tradition established in the Middle Ages (Hardy, 1990; Applebaum, 1992; Goldman, 1998, cited in Dawson, 2005). The ordinary secular occupations of life were seen as embedded in the world and, by implication, tainted with sin, so they could not be regarded as a vocation. Although not explicitly stated in the literature of the time, the inference is that sacred roles have a higher status and calling than secular ones (Schroeder, 2019).

Vocation has evolved throughout the many periods of society[2], one of the most significant periods was that of the Protestant Reformation of the late 15th and early 16th centuries (Applebaum, 1992; Dawson, 2005; Belder, 2017). Luther asserted that any work done for the glory of God and for the good of others was a vocation and that "vocation was a call to serve neighbours in the world rather than withdrawing from the world as a priest or a monk" (Gregg, 2005, p. 2). Martin Luther initiated a series of significant events during the Protestant Reformation, making notable progress in addressing the two-tier spirituality within the Christian faith that distinguished between the laity and the clergy, the ordinary Christian and the monk (Hardy, 1990). These events play an essential part in the move to address the sacred secular divide by extending vocation into secular work (Nel & Scholtz, 2016).

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[1] The terms vocation and calling will be used interchangeably throughout this document.
[2] See Nel and Scholtz (2016), who identify from the literature four historical periods that have contributed to the meaning of vocation: the early church, the Middle Ages, the Reformation period, and the modern period.

The Reformers also argued that nuns, priests, and monks did not have exclusive access to God and salvation; instead, laypeople could live lives filled with God as a ‘priesthood of all believers’. This idea, perhaps more than any other, helped expand the concept of vocation. The priesthood of all believers was not meant to turn everyone into full-time church workers but to elevate all types of work to a sacred calling (Veith, 2002). Luther described two callings for Christians: the call to join the people of God, which Luther called ‘spiritual calling,’ and a call to a specific line of work, which Luther termed ‘external calling’ (Placher, 2005). At the time, the Reformation played a crucial role in bridging the sacred-secular divide by broadening the concept of vocation to include secular work and affirming that the priesthood of all believers encompassed lay people living lives dedicated to God.

Things changed once society elevated scientific knowledge. Scientific knowledge became a matter of fact, while religion was confined to the realm of values and beliefs (Whelchel, 2019b). The idea was established that 'public space' was secular and therefore not a place for discussing religion. Religious belief was seen as a personal and thus private matter, not to be debated in public settings such as work, politics, education, and economics. The 'private space' for discussing religious issues was limited to Sundays and within the church building. This sort of change led writers such as Newbigin (1989) to reconsider how to present the gospel in a world influenced by the ideology of ‘religious pluralism’, which holds that the differences between religions are not about truth and falsehood. Instead, religious pluralism suggests that they are different perceptions of one truth and discussing what is true or false is considered unacceptable.

Removing God from the external world in this way confines God to within us, our psyche. God is secularised, and as a result, everyday matters become detached from religious or spiritual concerns. Here, we observe the development of our current twenty-first-century stance of ‘secularisation’, which has effectively separated the sacred from the secular (Berger, 1990). Whelchel (2019c) goes on to describe how we live in a ‘plausibility structure’ within a pluralistic society that separates truth into two categories: one we call facts (science) and the other we call beliefs (religion). This shift has led to a perspective that everything in our modern world falls into one of two groups: sacred or secular (Whelchel, 2019a).

The Industrial Revolution emerged from the growth of industries such as coal, iron, and textiles, as well as the expansion of electricity and transportation. The result was a focus on productivity, assembly lines, longer working hours, and the migration of individuals to cities with large factories. The sacred-secular divide widened as the church ceased to be present in the workers' everyday lives, and the Reformation doctrine that all vocations are sacred started to diminish. Industrialisation influences vocation by distancing people from working with God in maintaining and creating this world continuously (Chenu, 1963), as assigned to humankind in Genesis 2.

The rise of capitalism in these centuries was slow and long, and several writers have cautioned against reading too much capitalism into these centuries (Laslett, 1965, cited in Applebaum, 1992), contra Weber (1905). In a Western capitalist society, a secular version of the Protestant work ethic has precedence (Almen, 1984). Work is pursued for personal success and profit rather than for God and the worth of others, which places a significant part of our lives in the secular realm. This perspective relegates work to a secular setting, and, as Dorothy Sayers first pointed out in 1942, we should not be surprised that work has veered towards selfish and destructive ends:

> In nothing has the Church so lost her hold on reality as in her failure to understand and respect the secular vocation. She has allowed work and religion to become separate departments, and is astonished to find that, as a result, the secular work of the world is turned to purely selfish and destructive ends, and that the greater part of the world's intelligent workers have become irreligious, or at least, uninterested in religion. But is it astonishing? How can anyone remain interested in a religion which seems to have no concern with nine-tenths of his life? (Sayers, 2004, p. 8).

Sayers effectively highlights that the Church's disinterest in a domain that demands so much of a person's time and energy becomes an obstacle to involvement in the Christian life. Sherman makes a similar statement (2011), offering an alternative to abandoning work to the secular world by suggesting there is a place for recovering 'vocational stewardship' by the church. She defines vocational stewardship as "the intentional and strategic deployment of our vocational power—knowledge, platform, networks, position, influence, skills and reputation—to advance foretastes of God's kingdom" (p. 20). Adopting a vocational stewardship approach may be effective in bridging the sacred-secular divide concerning vocation.

Guiness (2003, p. 29) offers this helpful notion of calling:

> Calling is the truth that God calls us to himself so decisively that everything we are, everything we do, and everything we have is invested with a special devotion, dynamism, and direction lived out as a response to his summons and service.

Historically, this has not been how calling is portrayed in many IP churches. Calling is often viewed through a two-tier lens, making it hard for people to recognise their true calling. Many viewed it as something 'spiritual', often associated with the fivefold ministry giftings (Ephesians 4:11)[3], rather than recognising that what they are already doing as a parent, carer, family member, employee, or student is part of their calling. Similar to Luther, Guiness (2003) distinguishes between primary and secondary calling for the Christian. Our

[3] All scriptures are from the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition of the Bible.

primary calling is to God, to be in relationship with Him through faith in Jesus Christ, as expressed in John 3:16. It is a call to God, not to perform a specific task in a particular place. Through this calling, we fulfil our secondary calling, which is to undertake certain actions in life at specific locations. In other words, everything we do in life is an expression of our calling to God and can be reflected in our daily actions.

2.2.1 Opposing views on vocation and work

Some authors would argue that work is not a biblical expression of vocation, but we have made it so since the Reformation. The work of the French social theorist and theologian Jacques Ellul, cited in Placher (2005, p. 238), proposes that:

> Nothing in the Bible allows us to identify work with calling. When the terms that can be translated by the word 'vocation' or 'call from God' are encountered, they are always concerned with a summons to the specific service of God…Work…is an imperative for survival, and the Bible remains realistic enough not to superimpose upon this necessity a superfluous spiritual decoration.

Ellul appears strongly opposed to the view that jobs give meaning to people's lives, arguing that there is no biblical warrant for such a view. James Y. Holloway, an American Baptist, espouses that even traditional professions associated with the term vocation cannot be viewed as so, as 21st-century technology promotes the dehumanising goal of efficiency rather than "concern for one's fellow man" (Cited in Placher, 2005, p. 328). Holloway goes on to say this should not be a problem for a Christian, as the Bible has never suggested that a job is a vocation. Admittedly, technology and efficiency pose challenges to Christians, and maintaining human interactions and Godly decision-making as central is difficult, but not impossible. The ministry of Jesus Christ exemplifies an ability to sustain engagement with the hearts of humankind, which is central to all that we do, whether in social, political, or economic contexts.

More recently, Rotman (2017) examines the paradox of rediscovering vocation in modern psychology, where recognising vocation is closely associated with work and holds significant value in a person's life, in contrast with the theological shift away from vocation as work. His work seeks to unify psychological perspectives with the theological view by presenting the New Testament concept of calling and the use of the verb *kaleo*, which means 'to call'. This term refers to a calling to humans into fellowship with Christ or into God's Kingdom. It implies being called into the Body of Christ, with ethical implications that encourage us to live a life worthy of this calling (Ephesians 4:1), as well as an eschatological aspect. This eschatological aspect sees a life in God as an eternal call (1 Peter 5:10), which is demonstrated in an active 'hope' committed to justice and the renewal of society and creation.

Barth's (1961) work informs this view, as discussed previously, as does that of Volf (2001). Volf seeks to locate a theology of work within the expectation of the future reign of Christ through the spiritual gifts, rather than in vocation or creation. Volf believes that the future Kingdom of God will be established through the transformation of the current world, and work is part of our cooperation with God in this process, guided by the Holy Spirit and the gifts he describes as charisms. Volf suggests that by viewing work in this way, we will pursue social justice and ethical working environments as envisioned in the new creation, not as something that will be destroyed, but as something that requires transformation. Cosden (2005) expanded this critique, describing work as "an ontological part of humanness" (p. 175). Cosden did not see work as rooted in vocation. In his view, human work, while a vital part of creation, is not something to be achieved but rather something that completes our humanness, recognising the Reformation view of work as established in creation, alongside the perspectives of Volf and transformative eschatology.

Rotman (2017) also suggests there is no definitive New Testament link between vocation and a specific job. He does recognise that biblical examples of individuals called to perform particular tasks, such as Moses, Samuel, and Paul, exist. These calls were to specific duties rather than lifelong positions, and Rotman argues that these are secondary to the call into fellowship with Christ. Rotman broadens his perspective by suggesting that the New Testament idea of calling indirectly relates to work. There is an ethical aspect, which involves not only doing work honestly and ethically but also loving God and our neighbour (Mark 12:30-31, Galatians 5:13). Being called into fellowship with Christ naturally extends to helping and supporting others, both within and outside the Christian faith community (Veith, 2002; Witherington, 2011). Dik & Duffy (2012) propose that this approach is psychologically rewarding, and for Christians, it is spiritually rewarding.

The eschatological aspects of the call into fellowship with Christ represent hope in a world that is currently not entirely transformed. Hope is not passive "but an active commitment to justice, renewal and restoration of human society and all of creation" (Rotman, 2017, p. 29). This eschatological expression of hope is applied across all areas of life and work. Its broad scope equally encompasses all roles—paid, unpaid work, volunteering, or family caregiving. The aim is to encourage people to participate in God's cosmic reign. This approach does not suggest that the divine call pertains to a specific job but rather invites a call into fellowship with God from the perspective of the Kingdom of God and the fulfilment of His purposes.

Robinson (2023) also questions the idea that a calling can solely be work. He aims to develop an understanding of vocation and its implications for work, grounded in *Missio Dei*. The foundation of this approach is a missiological understanding of vocation rooted in God's mission for this world, emphasising the language of 'sending' within *Missio Dei*, which draws on the work of Bosch (2011). Robinson proposes that our single vocational call is to engage with the mission of God, and everything we do is lived out as an

expression of the *Missio Dei.* His view of the Lutheran stance on vocation is that it was context-specific, especially regarding work, and since work has significantly evolved, it no longer offers a useful foundation for a theology of work in the 21st century. Robinson particularly emphasises the renewal rather than the annihilation of the world, which greatly shapes his perception of calling and work.

The views of both Rotman (2017) and Robinson (2023), although differing from those of many Pentecostals, help to address several areas, such as the meaning of calling for someone who cannot work due to illness or disability. It also levels the ground regarding the types of work considered vocations and may even ease the grip within Pentecostalism that calling must be related to the five-fold ministry (Ephesians 4:11) to hold any eternal value.

2.2.2 Considerations for twenty-first-century Pentecostals

Vocation within Pentecostalism, particularly in an IP church, is complex and is deeply rooted in several theological positions. It remains associated either with a fivefold ministry gift calling (Ephesians 4:11) or with a church role. These roles remain hierarchically positioned above a secular role, highlighting the sacred-secular divide. Whilst not actively preached, there remains a strong apocalyptic view of eschatology which calls into question any other call but to preach the gospel and bring people into a relationship with Christ before the world is destroyed. This clearly has implications for work, raising questions about whether work could ever be a call or of value if everything in this world is going to be destroyed.

Notwithstanding the theological debates regarding the association of vocation with any form of work, these arguments fail to address the whole-life aspect of following Christ. Our call is to follow Christ with the whole of our lives as suggested in Matthew 22:36-39. In his book *The Call*, Os Guinness states, “The truth of calling means that for followers of Christ, ‘everyone, everywhere and in everything’ lives their whole life as a response to God’s call” (2003, p. 32). A vocation must truly encompass all our life roles. Am I called to be a mother, sibling, and wife, but not an employee or employer? Is my role as a citizen and member of the local community not part of my calling in life? Dividing my life into sections where God is active and where God is not fails to align with the principles in 1 Corinthians 10:31, which state that I should do everything in my life to the glory of God.

A seminal turning point in my own understanding of vocation was when I read *Diversity of Vocations* (Dennis, 2008). Dennis’s vocation was neither linear nor singular but evolved throughout her life. She was a physicist, a wife and mother of six children, a farmer, and later a single parent and carer. In her later years, she became a voice for social change at local, national, and global levels. Dennis engaged with communities and

joined organisations advocating for social justice and peace for the voiceless, eventually travelling internationally to support those in need of rescue from difficult situations. Dennis found her understanding of vocation in the words of John Neafsey, a clinical psychologist and theology lecturer from Chicago, who suggests that vocation has to do with the "kind of person we are called to be, the quality of our personhood, the values and attributes we embody, the integrity and authenticity of our lives" (2006, p. 5). Dennis suggests Neafsey presents vocation in a "broad, interdisciplinary and ecumenical sense" (2008, p. 9). In my vocational journey, I have come to understand the different ways in which I recognise the cadence of God's voice. Neafsey describes the "divine source of wisdom, mysteriously both beyond and within ourselves", that "guides us in the path of our true calling and summons us to our destiny" (2006, p. 6). It may be an inner voice deep within me, a heartfelt discussion with another person, or recognising a need within my local community, such as deprivation and the requirement for health and social care services. All these guide my life towards my calling and destiny.

A vocation may involve a priesthood, ordination, secular work, full-time ministry, bi-vocational ministry, homemaking, and/or parenting. To adopt the narrow view that vocation can be only one of these limits us from the principle of the priesthood of all believers, which remains a core belief in most Pentecostal churches. This study will explore the perspectives of members of an IP church regarding vocation, particularly in relation to work, to inform the actions of the gathered church, support the scattered church, and deepen their understanding of core theological views.

2.3 The sacred-secular divide

The sacred-secular divide implies that certain aspects of our lives are valued by God, such as attending church on Sundays and participating in other church activities, prayer, and worship, whereas other areas, like work, home, school, and university, are considered less significant. Greene (2010) proposes that, due to this sacred-secular divide, Christians often feel unprepared for mission, are unaware of God's purpose in their lives, and do not expect to experience the Holy Spirit's presence in those areas of life.

Os Guinness considers this dualistic view:

> Higher vs. lower, sacred vs. secular, perfect vs. permitted, contemplation vs. action…the dualism and elitism in this view need no underscoring. Sadly, this 'two-tier' or 'double-life' view of calling flagrantly perverts biblical teaching by narrowing the sphere of calling and excluding most Christians from its scope. It also dominated later Christian thinking (2003, p. 32).

Pursuing this sacred secular divide can create lives of two unconnected halves. Tozer (1993) refers to this as the 'sacred secular heresy', which confuses Christians as they try to navigate the two very separate

aspects of their lives. On the one hand, they see a glimpse of a tiny part of their lives that has eternal value but then spend most of their time doing work seen as having no eternal value, leading to frustration. Tozer argues this is "wholly unnecessary and due to a misunderstanding of a divide that does not exist within the New Testament" (1993, p. 111). With this comes a divide not only in our lives but also between the relevance of church on a Sunday and its impact on our Monday and the rest of the week. In 1976, William Diehl, a successful steel salesperson, wrote in his book *Christianity and Real Life*:

> I have never been in a congregation where there was any type of public affirmation of a ministry in my career. In short, I must conclude that my church really doesn't have the least interest in whether or how I minister in my daily work (1976, pp. 56-57).

Diehl goes on to suggest that many laypeople feel the church has abandoned them in their weekday world. Whilst this was written in 1976, authors such as Rude (2013) and Greene (2010) would suggest from their research that this has not changed. Greene (2010) cites from the LICC Survey 'Apprentice 09' "The vast majority of Christians have not been equipped for mission in their daily contexts, nor are they being helped to live out the abundant life in Christ where they spend most of their time." (p. 5).

Greene describes the sacred-secular divide as an obstacle to fruitfulness and joyful Christian living for those whose lives are mostly lived outside of the church. Buxton (2007) offers a detailed historical background on dualism, from which the sacred-secular divide originates, and encourages celebration and re-connection to culture and creation rather than fearing the sacred-secular divide.

Greene suggests that his study revealed Evangelical Christians found preaching and teaching in their churches least helpful in the areas of home and work, despite spending the majority of their time there. Greene concludes that "the key problem is not that we have failed to regard work as significant but that we have failed to regard all of life as significant" (2010, p. 13). He uses a straightforward analogy: the Christian life is not like an orange divided into separate segments such as work, home, and leisure, which is an unnatural division. Instead, it is more like a peach, a whole fruit that should symbolise our entire lives lived as Christ followers. This misunderstanding helps explain why there is little preaching and teaching on these topics in church. Focusing on these areas would influence how home Bible studies and prayer groups shape their activities to reflect their local communities and lived experiences. Christians would start asking different questions about how they see God working in their current circumstances, what God is teaching them, and how to pray to influence those areas.

Navigating two worlds with different moral codes, value systems, and cultures is complex and challenging for Christians. The drive for personal achievement in the secular world is separate from the work

of grace we recognise on a Sunday, but this might reduce conflict if we keep these areas apart. For some Christians, maintaining a sacred-secular divide may help avoid such conflict and enable the church to remain a refuge from work or home difficulties (Buxton, 2007). In truth, however, this separation hinders our ability to practice the Christian life daily. Navigating conflicting cultures and values is an essential part of living out the Christian faith for the good of the individual, the workplace, and ultimately, the community. By analysing attitudes and perceptions towards secular work, I aimed to uncover any underlying beliefs about the sacred-secular divide, which will shape our approach as the gathered church in support of the scattered church

2.4 Work

Work in our current Western society is very different from the work our forefathers knew and recognised. For Christians, finding a meaningful theological narrative of work is complex and adds to the challenges of the workplace and understanding their faith position within contemporary society. This section considers the biblical context of work and work within the Pentecostal tradition.

2.4.1 Work from a biblical context

Work is spoken about at the beginning of the bible, indicating how important and basic it is to humankind and God (Keller, 2012). The bible's account of creation begins by declaring God as the worker who created the entire universe (Traeger & Gilbert, 2013). Within Genesis 1:31, God not only works but finds delight in it. The second chapter of Genesis demonstrates that God not only creates but also cares for creation. God works and creates humankind to continue this work in Genesis 1:28, telling us to “fill the earth and subdue it”. Subdue suggests that there is more potential to be unlocked from creation that humankind can unlock through work, and then oversee its application and use. It is from these verses that writers promote the ‘creation mandate’, a call to meaningful work and restoration within the world (Miller, 2009; Keller, 2012; Stevens, 2012; Comer, 2015; Dik, 2020).

2.4.2 Work in contemporary society

Within contemporary society, individuals seek ‘meaningful work' based on the idea that all humans desire to undertake meaningful tasks, especially amidst significant changes in the nature of work. Work takes place in various environments, often under precarious employment arrangements within neoliberal regimes in many Western societies, placing the burden on individuals to manage their careers and work with limited safety nets, such as secure employment contracts. Automating many tasks reduces the sense of meaningfulness gained from a job well done. Organisations face increasing pressure due to globalisation,

emerging technologies, and new ways of connecting and communicating (Bailey, et al., 2019). Within these evolving environments, finding meaning in work is complex. The literature on meaningfulness has been compiled from various academic fields, yet it remains a fundamentally contested concept (Gallie, 1956). There is some agreement that meaningfulness signifies a "positive, subjective, individual experience" in relation to work (Bailey, et al., 2019, p. 482). The absence of meaningful work leaves individuals vulnerable to harm, as they are unable to satisfy their inescapable need for purpose and to live a flourishing life (Yeoman, 2013). Modernity presents specific challenges for individuals seeking moral anchors to demonstrate the value of their work amidst increased ambiguity and uncertainty (Sennett, 2007). Finding meaningful work is partly achieved by engaging with others, whether through a sense of belonging or a sense of contribution (Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012). The way work is now configured and delivered makes this process more challenging.

2.5 Conclusion

The experiences of IP Christians concerning their work and faith need further research. Butler (2005) suggests that the dilemma many Pentecostals face is the historic view that they live in a world they are called to influence yet are also sworn to withdraw from. This world is not their home; they are merely passing through. Depending on their eschatology, if this world is heading towards destruction, why attempt to change what is inevitable? Pentecostals often perceive the present through the lens of an imminent return of Jesus (see Section 2.1.2). This can be criticised as an escapist tendency and might require a revision of their eschatology to retain social relevance. Although the Kingdom of God will be fulfilled at Jesus' return, it is also breaking into the present. I concur with Warrington (2008) that the more Pentecostals absorb the customs of Western secularism and materialism in an individualistic, fragmented and subjective way, the less they will engage in the society in which they live.

As a leader in an IP Church, I know from informal discussions that Christians in my local community find it difficult to operate in this postmodern environment. One of the issues raised is how to share their faith in a pluralistic world that dismisses a single truth, where the metanarrative promoted in the Bible is rejected or simply unknown by others. While sharing faith is important in a Pentecostal setting, I am sure there are many other areas of challenge that have not been addressed. By undertaking this study, I am creating a space for those discussions to take place. There is also a clear need for members of the local congregation to understand that their work is meaningful and not a lower calling than that of those called to church ministry. Developing a narrative of work for the Pentecostal Christian is important, as it shapes our formation and guides us towards our goal of reflecting Christ in this world.

The discussions I had with congregation members prior to commencing this study were limited; therefore, I lacked a proper understanding of how Pentecostal theology shaped their perceptions of work. I was confident that there was a rich personal narrative among individuals in a Pentecostal setting regarding their lived experiences of faith in this postmodern society, which had yet to be explored, and that it would provide valuable insights into their attitudes and perceptions regarding secular work. I propose that Appreciative Inquiry, as described in the following chapter, is a useful approach for uncovering those narratives. The context of IP Church communities in the UK is under-researched, and this study also seeks to contribute to the emerging body of Pentecostal theology (Warrington, 2008; Vondey, 2017; Aldred, 2019).

Chapter 3: Appreciative Inquiry

This chapter offers a brief introduction to Appreciative Inquiry (AI) and its core principles. Its connections to social construction are outlined, along with a summary of how AI has been adopted in various settings, with particular emphasis on its use in church congregations. The critiques of AI are also discussed, along with their implications for this study.

3.1 Overview of AI

AI originated from David Cooperrider's doctoral research in 1986. His thesis focused on physician leadership at the Cleveland Clinic, a well-respected medical centre in the United States of America (USA). By encouraging clinicians to share their successes and failures through storytelling, Cooperrider observed increased positive cooperation and innovation when leaders reflected on their achievements rather than problems and failures. Based on this research, Cooperrider developed an approach to organisational development called 'Appreciative Inquiry'. The overall concept of AI as a tool for organisational change involves recognising what exists, discussing what ought to be, and planning what will be (Watkins, et al., 2011). It is regarded as a form of action research that emphasises what is right within the organisation or community, unlike traditional action research, which typically begins with a problem. Cooperrider & Srivastva (1987) challenge action researchers' assumption that organisations and those within them are problems to be solved, and provide an alternative view that they are a miracle to be embraced. In the context of a church congregation, this seems a fitting approach to the study.

AI is based on the fundamental assumption that groups, communities, and organisations can develop towards the qualities or themes they explore (Cantore & Cooperrider, 2013). AI is not merely about the positive aspects, according to Bushe (2007, p. 30), it is:

> …the quest for new ideas, images, theories, and models that liberate our collective aspirations, alter the social construction of reality, and, in the process, make available decisions and actions that were not available or did not occur to us before.

Mishra & Bhatnagar (2012) suggest that AI should not be regarded as just one among many organisational development tools, but rather as a philosophy and approach that can transform the practice of organisational learning, design and development.

AI is rooted in storytelling, a form of human interaction prevalent across different societies and cultures. In Pentecostalism, storytelling is linked with parables and other narratives from the Word of God,

and to some extent, in the sharing of ‘testimonies’ during Pentecostal church services and home groups. AI is an inclusive, relational approach that aims to uncover the values, wisdom, and capabilities of those involved, which generates the energy needed for the desired change (Mantel & Ludema, 2000).

AI is positioned on five principles advocated originally by Cooperrider & Srivastva (Cooperrider, et al., 2008) which are summarised below:

1. Constructivist Principle
   This principle is related to social construction theory which proposes that we base our thoughts about the world and its related realities upon interpretation and construction, not just observed phenomena. As the interpretation will differ person by person, there will be multiple realities. Within an AI approach, this principle is modelled when people tell stories about the past, present and future. Stories have the power to shape and reflect the way people think and act. This thesis centres on storytelling and this AI principle.
2. Principle of Simultaneity
   This principle states that inquiry and change are simultaneous, for change to happen, inquiry, acting as an intervention, is required. This principle was evident as emergent changes in the early stages of this study.
3. Poetic Principle
   This principle reminds us that people continually frame their world based on which parts of their stories interest them more and with which they would like to experiment, making what is chosen to research important. This was apparent in the level of participation and ongoing discussions by congregants in this study.
4. Anticipatory Principle
   This principle is based on the idea that an organisation, community, or group member’s current behaviour is shaped by their perception of the future of that organisation, community, or group. A future that is full of hope and positive experiences influences behaviour. It is this principle that I anticipated would bring change to the congregation in response to envisioning a future that was positive and that inspired hope.
5. Positive Principle
   This principle emerged as AI practitioners found that questions framed positively rather than negatively provoked more engagement and excitement from participants. This may reflect the fact that when people’s interests are focused, it is easier to involve them in the process. Engaging interest

involves asking positive questions. This would be reflected in the level of engagement both in the study and the future visioning activities within the congregation.

There are a number of iterations of the AI model with the 4D (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005) and 5D (Cooperrider, et al., 2008) cycles being the most popular. In this study, I applied the 5D cycle described by Bushe (2012) as a useful framework for implementing AI concepts. The application in the study is described in detail in Chapter 4, including details of the five stages of this cycle, which are:

Define - What will we look for?

Discovery – Identify the best of what is.

Dream – Explore what might be.

Design – Create what will be.

Destiny – Deliver what will be.

A key activity in AI is the development of 'Provocative Propositions' (PPs). These statements draw on the organisation's past and future dreams to provide an aspirational vision.

3.2 What are Provocative Propositions?

PPs express the ideas in an AI study in very tangible ways and focus the outputs of the heart of the AI work. They are very local statements that ground the study and illustrate its impact on the study's setting. PPs attempt to balance creative, blue-sky thinking with a pragmatic approach to engagement and achievement of the statements (Rowett, 2013). A PP can be described as a statement that bridges the best of what is and what might be (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010). It is provocative to the extent that it stretches the realm of the current situation, challenges common beliefs and practices, and suggests desired opportunities for the church and its congregation, yet it is grounded in what has worked in the past (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010). Whilst implying action, they do not prescribe what that action should be. The journey to developing the PPs is one of stages, considering the specific setting and stories the participants share. PPs are not what we 'should' be doing or good ideas for the church's vision statement. I would describe them as deeply rooted in the data from the storytelling and birthed out of the imagined futures crafted during the AI process.

The purpose of PPs is to collectively envision the church's future, drawing on the positive aspects of its past. PPs create an opportunity to describe how we want the future to look and feel. Watkins, Mohr and Kelley (2011, p. 218) describe PPs as "an imaginative statement about the future, crafted as if it were already experienced and generative". Within the original AI process, they are often referred to as the bridge between the dream and design stages. Several AI experts (Ludema, et al., 2006; Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010; Zandee & Cooperrider, 2013) repeatedly stress that there is no single way to carry out AI activities. Whitney

& Trosten-Bloom (2010) do offer helpful steps to develop this part of the AI process. I was alert to these suggestions during this study.

The first is identifying a meaningful social architecture within a church setting, which could include the vision, purpose, leadership, communication methods, roles, and relationships. Ideas in themselves do not create change. Branson (2016), in his AI work with congregations, highlights the need for new synergies, connections and relationships to facilitate the changes required to reach the desired future. As a practitioner, I had to carefully consider the church's social architecture throughout the design stage of AI, as it needed to support the AI work to progress successfully.

The second involves selecting relevant and strategic design elements. No organisation completely re-designs everything in its makeup; it tends to be more of an iterative process; as one design element changes, it requires change elsewhere in the organisation. This process involves examining the final themes, identified and the dreams for the future, then determining what design elements need to be congruent to achieve the espoused dreams. An example within this study setting was the use of our church database. One of the key elements within the final themes we identified was to be a welcoming, connected, relational church. However, our current use of the church database focuses more on attendance numbers than on utilising its many features to strengthen connections and extend a welcome to new members of our church family. The future use of the database will be included in the project's action planning stage.

The third step in this stage is to identify organisational design preferences. This is about identifying, during the study discussions, which design preferences the people involved view as ideal. To do this, we had to continually refer to the story transcripts, with the final themes forming the positive core and the dreams for the future. This is not straightforward, as deferring to preferences can restrict change. Still, with careful listening and, in this setting, a level of discernment, it was possible to identify valuable preferences such as collaboration and inclusivity. Both were important considerations when developing the PPs. The development of PPs in this study is described in Chapter 6, section 6.4.

3.3 Adoption of AI

AI has been used as a change and research approach in many settings, including large global organisations such as British Airways, John Deere, and Hunter Douglas, as well as the armed forces. Ludema et al. (2006) reviews the use of AI in 120 non-governmental agencies worldwide. There has been significant adoption of AI in healthcare (Chapman & Giles, 2009; Hung, et al., 2018; McSherry, et al., 2018; Davies-Abbott, 2025), with NHS Scotland adopting AI as an innovation and change process across many of its services (Sharp, et al., 2018). Also, in education (Cunningham, et al., 2005; Cherkowski & Walker, 2019; Kniffin & Greenleaf, 2023; Strimel & Francis, 2023; Pill, et al., 2024).

For this study, I will concentrate on its use in churches, with the work of Branson (2016), viewed as an exemplar case study. The study narrates the story of a 90-year-old Canadian Presbyterian congregation's experience of hope and renewal, using AI to prepare a missional report to guide the appointment of a new senior minister. Locke (2018) adopts Branson's approach to AI to bring change and missional enthusiasm to a declining church in California. Other church studies have included exploration of church ministries, strategic planning, collaborative ministry and cultures (Nordenbrock, 2008; Blenko, 2017; Slack & Thomas, 2017; Locke, 2018; Adams, 2019; Price, 2019; Spoelstra, 2020). None of which has used AI to explore faith and secular work.

Most church related AI studies are in the United States of America (USA), with very few in the United Kingdom (UK). Price (2019) explores ministry in the twenty-first century in the UK United Reform Churches, combining AI with the pastoral cycle and practical theology. Adams (2019) explores collaborative ministry in the Church of Wales. Within the UK, 'Appreciating Church', a Christian ecumenical project originally a collaboration between the United Reformed Church, the Methodist Church, Quakers, and the Congregational Federation, with interest from individual dioceses of the Church of England and others, has progressed the application of AI within churches. The Church of Scotland has also utilised AI and provided guidelines for all its churches. The use of AI in an IP church is limited, and so far, I have not found any UK academic studies in this area. This study aims to address this gap.

3.4 AI and social construction

AI parallels work in other fields such as wellbeing theory, positive imagery, positive psychology and social constructionism which will be the focus of this section. AI is concerned with meaning and interpretation rather than measurable facts and shares a conceptual link with social constructionism, which aligns to my own ontological and epistemological assumptions discussed in Chapter 4. Knowledge formation within this paradigm is characterised by collectivism rather than individualism. Constructionism recognises the community as a source of knowledge and, as such, aligns with AI and other forms of action research (Gergen & Gergen, 2013). The roots of AI in constructionism are significant, as they are reflected in the research process and the role of the researcher. The AI researcher collaborates with others and acknowledges the importance of interdependencies for the success of their research. They deliberately connect the researched community with the professionals conducting the research to achieve outcomes shared by all involved, thereby challenging any hierarchy of knowledge ownership (Gergen & Gergen, 2013). Gergen & Gergen, referring to all forms of action research, propose that "It is not the task of the action researcher to describe *the world as it is,* but to realize visions of *what the world can become*" (2013, pp. 167, authors' italics). For this study, the social construction underpinnings of AI are conducive to creating a vision of the future within the

congregation. Constructionism has a synergistic effect, promoting productive dialogue and potential new futures, both of which will inform this study. Within constructionism, there is a concept called 'relational constructionism' (Van der Haar & Hosking, 2004) that closely aligns with the AI approach. Relational constructionism suggests that "reality is a consequence of the language, dialogue and relationship that exists between participant and researcher" (Johnson, 2015, p. 51). It is this co-construction that made this an appropriate choice for the study.

3.5 Critiques of AI

AI is known for its positive stance, which is presented as an opposition to the problem-solving stance of several research and change approaches. This positivity positioning has its critics. Fineman (2006) asserts that the prominent positioning of positivity leads to a false separation of positive and negative events and feelings, which ignores the value of negative experiences in life. Barge and Oliver (2003) raise similar challenges and, along with Fineman (2006), raise concerns that the positive bias of AI silences critical voices and is a form of control. These arguments are countered by Zandee & Cooperrider (2013), who maintain that the focus of AI is exploration of the life-giving attributes of a human system, and those attributes can be found in the "full spectrum of human experiences" (p. 191). To achieve this, they suggest avoiding the tendency to think in terms of positive/negative oppositions when deploying AI methodology. Quinney & Richardson (2014) successfully reflect this full spectrum of human experiences in their AI study involving residents in a homeless hostel who face numerous life challenges, such as addictions and mental health concerns.

Cooperrider & Avital et al. (2013) advise AI practitioners to avoid being drawn to the positivity of AI but to focus on the power of inquiry. It is the form of inquiry that has the ability to inspire a high level of 'generativity' (Gergen, 1978; Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). Generativity as described by psychoanalyst Erik Erikson (1959) involves creativity, creating new meaning for things, and adding value, all of which contribute to making the world a better place both now and in the future. The overemphasis on positivity has been addressed in a small number of comparative studies of AI, namely by Bushe (2010), who concludes that the level of positivity was not a predictor of the level of change, but it is "the generation of compelling and new ideas that are central to the change process" (p. 21). Duncan & Ridley-Duff (2014) contend that a critical thinking approach to AI is required to address the complexities of human dynamics and power, and they demonstrate this in a study involving marginalised Pakistani women in Sheffield. Shifts in AI methodology towards critical appreciation (Ridley-Duff & Duncan, 2015) and the recent development of 'open AI', which emphasises informal 'enquiry', not formal 'inquiry' (Dorr, et al., 2025), are ways of facilitating AI in environments that may include dissonant voices. Fitzgerald et al. (2010) uses the term 'shadow' as a

generative metaphor that incorporates the more difficult experiences and emotions of life, whilst still maintaining the generativity that AI requires.

I have my own perspective on the need to see comments as polar opposites—positive or negative, good or bad. I suggest that all comments be regarded as part of life experiences, offering us a more complete view of participants' experiences and perceptions. In this study, I intend to offer some reflections on how any perceived negative feedback from participants can be handled within the AI process. There is also some criticism of the rigid application of any chosen AI model (Barge & Oliver, 2003). As this study shows, an intuitive approach is required for the particular setting rather than a rigid application of the chosen AI model (Bushe & Kassam, 2005; Ludema, et al., 2006; Zandee & Cooperrider, 2013). Rather than controlling the voices heard, AI requires the presence of all participant voices to be transformative rather than maintaining the current state. This includes those who may not usually have an opportunity to have a voice and shape the future, such as members of a congregation. A further critique of AI is that it is not reflective throughout the cycles (Grant & Humphries, 2006; Fitzgerald, et al., 2010; Clouder & King, 2015; Treacy, 2022). I have sought to address this by deploying reflection at various stages of the AI cycles described in Chapter 7, and I discuss this critique in Chapter 8 (section 8.3.3). AI offers a potential approach to collaborative theological action research in an IP church setting that views the congregation as a source of significant wisdom and knowledge, and as a miracle to embrace, not a problem to be solved (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987).

Chapter 4: Research methodology

This research is grounded in practical theology and falls within the field of Theological Action Research (TAR). In this approach, I have employed AI as a method to promote change within my congregation. Before examining in detail how I used AI to address my research questions, I will outline the general discourse and the conceptual frameworks that contextualise the study.

4.1 Practical theology

Practical theology, according to Swinton & Mowat (2016, p. 3), "locates itself within the diversity of human spiritual and mundane experience, making its home in the complex web of relationships and experiences that form the fabric of all we know". To conduct research into these diverse and complex phenomena, there is a wide range of approaches, methods and methodological positions within the discipline. Swinton & Mowat locate practical theology within a conceptual framework with several characteristics, namely, 'performing the faith', meaning the faithful performance of the gospel, exploring and taking seriously the complex dynamics of the human encounter with God and the 'significance of experience'. While experience does not replace divine revelation, human experience is considered important, as the gospel is not only a belief in something but also something to be lived. Human experience is a place where "the gospel is grounded, embodied, interpreted and lived out" (Swinton & Mowat, 2016, p. 6).

Swinton & Mowat offer a useful provisional definition of practical theology:

> Practical Theology is critical, theological reflection on the practices of the Church as they interact with the practices of the world, with a view to ensuring and enabling faithful participation in God's redemptive practices in, to and for the world (2016, p. 6).

This definition indicates that the focus of investigation within practical theology is not only the experiences of Christians and the practices of the church but also the practices of the world. This study explores secular work as lived by Christians in this world setting. Swinton & Mowatt (2016, p. 8) make the point that "the practices of the church cannot be understood as ontologically separate from the world" as both the world and the church exist within God's creation, and both are an implicit part of God's redemptive plan for the world. This definition also urges a critical approach to enquiry that challenges assumptions and practices that may have been accepted for years. Practical theologians recognise that the questions they ask will always be answered from some sort of contextual position. The information acquired will then lead to a different understanding of the lived experiences and practical action that have enabled faithful participation. Graham (2013) describes this understanding as a form of 'practical wisdom' which is expressed by Cameron et al. (2010, p. 52) as "a

part of the ongoing dynamic of God's revealing life". This elucidates the clear theological connection between theological practice and everyday living and, importantly, provides us with a form of words, helpfully described as "theological fluency" (Graham, 2013, p. 163), to discuss and describe these aspects of our faith.

Practical theology is a form of theological reflection. Some critics have argued that practical theologians have lost sight of their theological roots and have allowed knowledge from the social sciences to take centre stage (Swinton, 2011; Swinton & Mowat, 2016). Swinton and Mowatt (2016) propose that there should be a clear boundary between social sciences and theology, with theology having precedence. I concur with Ward (2011) who proposes these boundaries are not so rigid because the Church is made up of both human and divine natures and these should both be explored in research. As this professional doctorate in ministry uses a social science methodology, I embedded theological reflection in my research to anchor practical theology as an equally significant source of knowledge alongside that of the congregation.

4.2 Research paradigm

The interconnected stages of ontology, epistemology and methodology form a research paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). My ontological assumption is that of constructionism (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005), which assumes that an objective world exists, but interaction must take place with the object or phenomenon in order to ascertain meaning. I align with the position of Denzin & Lincoln, (2018, p. 113) who "believe that a goodly proportion of social phenomena consists of the meaning-making activities of groups and individuals around these phenomena. The meaning-making activities themselves are of central interest to social constructionists".

My epistemological assumption underpinning this research is 'interpretist'. The interpretist epistemology is one of subjectivism, the world does not exist independently of our knowledge of it. Meaning is not discovered, rather it is constructed through the interactions between consciousness and the world. Heron & Reason (1997) describe how to experience the world we need to participate in it and simultaneously shape and encounter it (Cohen, et al., 2007). When observing phenomena, individuals will construct meaning in different ways (Crotty, 1998), but the truth is a consensus formed by co-constructors. This co-construction can be between the researcher and the participants (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). I am researching how people develop their religious beliefs about faith and work. The implications of taking a social construction approach are, in some ways, radical to my faith tradition because it proposes that the 'truth' about faith and work is not something that is 'out there to be discovered'. The true way for people to relate to work is not hidden in the Bible waiting to be discovered and observed. Such truth is waiting to be forged in the social interactions and explorations of the Body of Christ. How this sits within the Pentecostal tradition and its position of the Bible

as the ultimate truth could be controversial on first hearing, but possibly on further reflection, and as this study demonstrates, it is much closer to the way things actually work in practice. Within the Pentecostal tradition, congregants find 'truth' mainly through the Bible, as expounded by preachers. This 'truth' is then applied to our lives and viewed as faithful practice. This study assumes that truth also emerges from social interactions within the Body of Christ. This may be best explained as the truth not being viewed as a set of isolated propositions but revealed in the stories of people. This is much more akin to Jesus' use of parables that invite people to find meaning for themselves in stories of everyday experience. Within Pentecostalism, the role of the Holy Spirit in creating meaning and direction through lived experience is also an important factor, which could be a way to make constructionist and interpretivist approaches more acceptable within my tradition.

Constructionist and interpretist approaches are best suited to qualitative inquiry. I initially explored the idea of some form of collaborative Action Research (AR), particularly Theological Action Research (TAR), which provides both a way of engaging others, bringing change, and doing theological reflection. Following a small pilot study, I altered my initial choice of method to AI, a specific form of AR, which I have situated within the broader scope of TAR. The reason for this change and an explanation of the methodology are discussed later in this chapter.

4.3 Action Research

Some writers view AR as an orientation, a stance rather than a methodology (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2007; Reason & Bradbury, 2013; Herr & Anderson, 2014). For the purpose of my research, I am defining AR as a methodology, an overall approach to my field of qualitative research. This methodology encompasses methods that share common philosophical and epistemological assumptions (Swinton & Mowat, 2016). AR is an inquiry that is done *'by'* or *'with'* insiders, never '*to'* or '*on'* them, which locates it well as a research methodology for research in a church congregation setting where participants are fellow brothers and sisters in Christ and part of a wider church family. From a practical theology perspective, AR is a useful methodology for research undertaken within a congregation. Coughlan (2016, p. 92) frames a practical philosophy of knowing for AR that resonates with a congregational setting in terms of four characteristics:

1. Everyday concerns of human living
2. How practical knowing is socially derived and constructed
3. How its uniqueness in each situation needs to be attended to
4. How values drive practical action and is fundamentally an ethical process.

From this broader process of AR, I then decided to consider a theologically specific form of AR termed TAR (Cameron, et al., 2010), which provided a form of AR that further resonates with the study of practical theology.

4.4 Theological Action Research

Theological Action Research (TAR) is a method that has been seen as complementing "the discipline of theology in particular" (Norman, 2011, p3 cited in Brouard, 2015). Graham (2013) identifies certain affinities between practical theology and AR, which include the joint aversion to deductive models where universal theories are applied to real-life situations, a joint commitment to human flourishing and liberation, as well as "an understanding of their respective fields as necessarily multi-disciplinary, eclectic and unsystematic, rather than a single discourse" (p. 149).

The similarities persist in the need not only to research the world around them but also to change it. Graham (2013) suggests that the purposes of the research should be to consider if AR and practical theology are merely aiming at improvements in practice which would include enhanced competence or strategic change, or if they reflect a more radical epistemology that sees "practice as disclosive of meaning and an understanding of action as a legitimate source of knowledge about the world – and in the case of practical theology, about God in the world?" (Graham, 2013, p. 149). If this is the case, then the purpose of such research is not limited to generating expertise but to transforming understandings and values, thereby creating a new kind of practical wisdom (Graham, 2013). This practical wisdom unfolds for practical theologians as a deeper understanding and participation in the life and practices of God in the world. Graham (2013) describes this as a dispositional understanding or an attentiveness. It is more than articulating a discourse that describes an abstract understanding; rather, it is a genuine quest to identify practical wisdom, or phrónēsis, as the research's outcome.

Cameron et al. (2010) claim that practical theology should be regarded as a form of action research, which they term 'theological action research' (TAR). TAR emerged from a research partnership that established the Action Research: Church and Society (ARCS) project at Ripon College, Cuddeston. AR and TAR are positioned towards the achievement of practical outcomes; to this end, action and reflection must be intertwined, leading not only to an outcome in the external situation but also to an inner change that cultivates theologically grounded practical wisdom. It is this synthesis of action and reflection that will be important in this study. As the context of my AR study is a church and people with religious beliefs, I intend to draw on the principles of TAR as it "sets the research process firmly within the lived world of religious faith and theology" (Coughlan, 2014, p. 776) and is described as a contextualisation of AR.

The main characteristics of TAR are:

1. It is theological all the way through
2. It involves an understanding of 'theology in four voices'
3. Theology is disclosed through a conventional method
4. It offers a formative transformation of practice
5. It allows practice to contribute to the transformation of theology

(Modified from Brouard, 2015)

As with any collaborative AR methodology this contextualised model moves from practice to reflection to practice iteratively.

The ARCS team developed a framework for using TAR which includes appointing an insider team from within the organisation undertaking the research and an outsider team who are usually from an academic setting who agree the research design. Based on feedback from a small pilot study I conducted, I did not feel that involving an outside academic team was feasible, as this was one of the objections raised by participants and in discussions with the broader congregation. The small-scale study involved four members of the congregation and explored their views on secular work and calling; the information and experiences informed my thinking for the larger-scale study. The pilot study yielded useful information, and the participants raised some relevant points for consideration in the development of a larger study, which wider members of the congregation affirmed:

1. They did not want to be seen to criticise God, the church or the leaders when exploring faith and work.
2. They did not want to have their views examined or scrutinised by academics who would highlight, in their view, their lack of theological knowledge.

This feedback clearly required serious consideration, as there was a strong sense of nervousness and fear of critique. I realised an approach was needed that was driven by a positive stance towards listening and creating change. Throughout the TAR process, the research teams are attentive to the various theological 'voices' present and audible in the Christian practices being explored. Within TAR, these distinct but often overlapping voices are described in a framework called the 'four voices of theology'.

4.5 The four voices of theology

The ‘four voices of theology’ is a heuristic framework devised by the ARCS team to analyse and interpret the research data. They identify espoused and operant voices at the level of practice and normative and formal at the reflective level (Cameron, et al., 2010). This framework brings all four voices into the conversation as equal; though distinct, they are also interrelated and overlap. A diagrammatic representation of the four voices framework is included in Figure 1. The framework is part of the TAR process, which has two main goals: to stimulate new actions and to make openings to a deeper faith dimension. These two goals are accomplished through a research process that improves theological literacy and particularly theological fluency (Coughlan, 2014). Although the framework is of significant benefit in establishing the centrality of theology in data analysis, Graham (2013) and Brouard (2015) both identify an ‘analytical gap’ once the data has been considered using the framework. There will be data that sits outside of the framework analysis; the researcher must then find a way to consider the data as a whole. Could there be some tentative steps towards researcher reflexivity, filling this gap alongside participant reflection? Yet another part of the bridge to be built as we walk and work on it in this study.

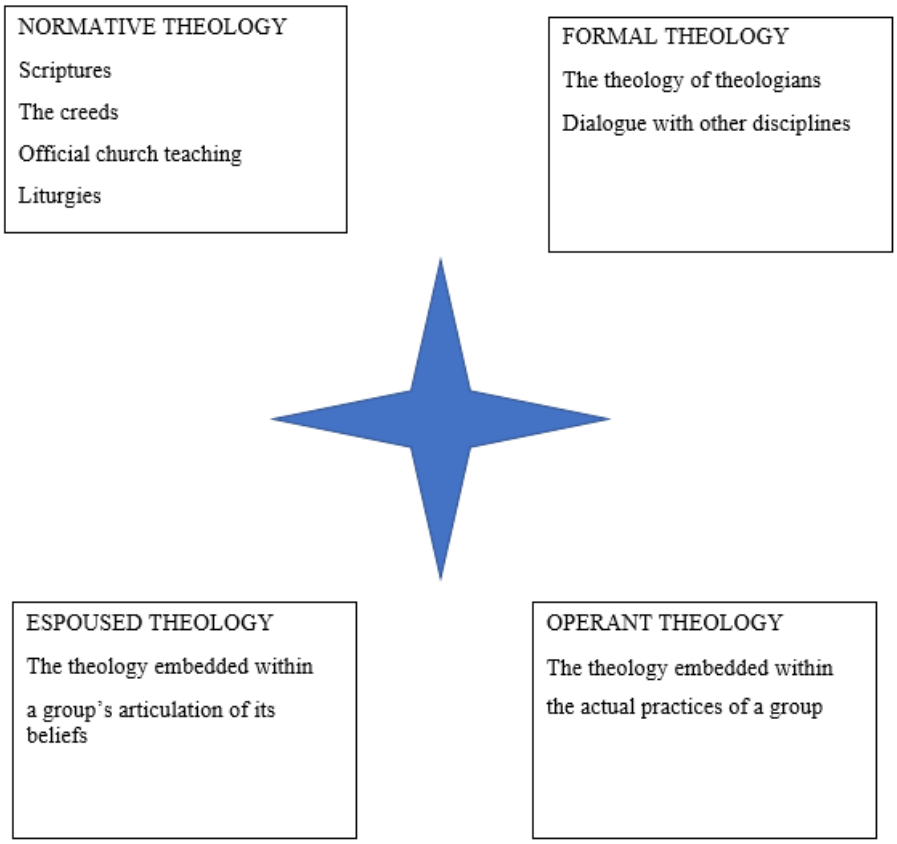


Figure 1: The four voices of theology (after Cameron et al. 2010)

As the main critique of any iteration of AR, including TAR, is that it is overly problem-focused, I decided to try and blend the reflective tools of TAR with the methodology of Appreciative Inquiry. Although AI was clearly an appropriate choice of research methodology, I was keen to integrate aspects of TAR into this study to strengthen the focus on practical theology. This was achieved by developing a hybrid research approach.

4.6 Ethical considerations

It was important to give detailed attention to the ethical aspects of this study for several reasons. This was not only a research study that benefitted me as a researcher and practitioner, but it was also important to the participants as they explored a significant area of their lives. The study also blurred the boundaries between research and a church-led change effort. Attention to ethical issues throughout the study also enhances the research's quality indicators (Tracy, 2010).

An application for ethical approval for the study was made via the University Ethics Committee. A risk assessment was conducted, considering the need for voluntary consent, appropriate data storage, and the maintenance of anonymity and confidentiality. Although the confidentiality of the data was maintained, full anonymity could not be guaranteed due to knowledge and relationships within the church congregation, as explained to the participants. The University Ethics Committee's requirements regarding participants' informed consent were adhered to, as evidenced by the development of information sheets and the collection of written consent. Participants were approached voluntarily to participate in the research and were informed that they could withdraw at any time. Throughout the study, ethics was not viewed as a one-time event, but rather as a continuous consideration. As Cochran-Smith & Lytle aptly put it, “Everything’s ethics” (2007, p. 24). This principle guided the wording of the research questions, the treatment of participants, and the prevention of harm. While the methodologies of TAR and AI inherently embed ethical considerations due to the co-production research approach, all necessary ethical processes were diligently followed in my research. Ethical approval was granted on 15 September 2021, approval code HUM-RS-JC-08-21-01. No amendments were required throughout the study, and no ethical issues were raised or identified that were not already addressed in the original ethical approval application.

4.7 Limitations of the study

The main limitation of this study is its transferability to different settings. The study conclusions were derived from a single site, an IP church located in a specific area of the UK. The findings from a similar study may yield different results even amongst other IP churches. While acknowledging this, I propose that there will be principles and data insights that could be of value to other IP churches. I have provided a detailed account of the study so that those who may wish to transfer the findings to their own churches can judge transferability (Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

The study setting features bivocational senior pastors, which may influence the findings, one of whom was the researcher in the study. Cresswell highlights the concern of researcher bias in the interpretation of data (2009). To help overcome this, a collaborative approach to analysing the data was adopted. Within a medium-sized church, a relationship between the researcher and participants can affect the research. However, it is also an asset in engaging participants, while being mindful not to exert power over individuals to participate in the study. The researcher also practised reflective journaling throughout the study and acknowledged the need to be reflexive (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), to help maintain study credibility, dependability, and consistency, all of which can enhance transferability.

4.8 Application of AI in this study

I applied the 5D cycle described by Bushe (2012) as a useful process for implementing the concepts of AI in my research, as shown in Figure 2 below. The five stages are:

Define – What will we look for?

This is about selecting a research topic that is sufficiently important for people to want to engage with it and drive change. It should be broad enough to allow participation through personal stories, meaningful for the church's future, and communicated positively. The subject area of the study is faith and work.

Discovery – Identify the best of what is.

This is the storytelling stage of AI, achieved by asking carefully crafted appreciative questions. These questions should inspire individuals to share their faith within the context of the chosen topic. They reflect on the best of the past as well as current experiences. During this stage, energy is generated to pursue the necessary changes in the future. In a church setting, it can be described as a time of discerning the future direction from the collective wisdom of the congregants, reflected in Matthew 13:52 as bringing out treasure that is both new and old (The Church of England Diocese of Ely, 2025).

Dream – Explore what might be.

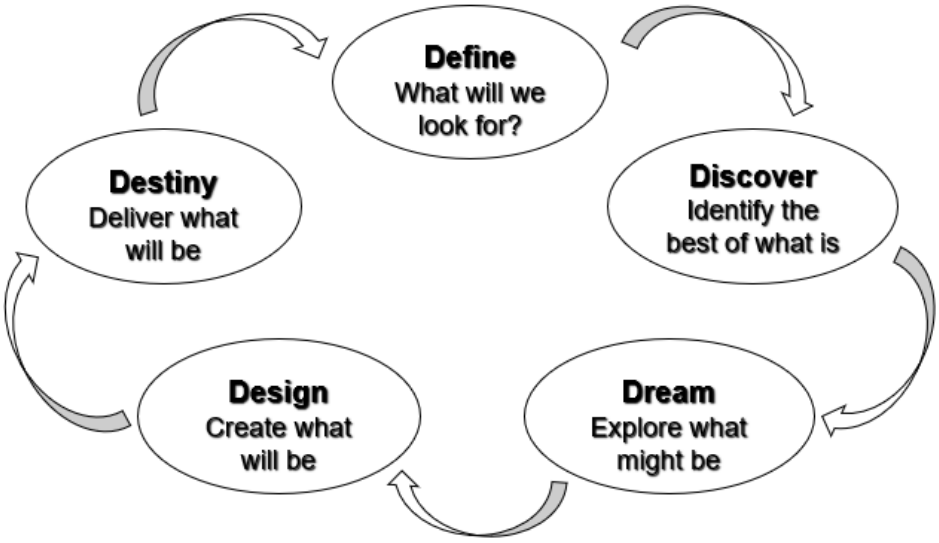
This is the space that encourages participants to imagine the future they envision for the church in relation to the subject area of faith and work. In this study, I incorporated the dream question into the discovery-stage questions rather than organising a second session with each participant. While dreaming is not an unusual concept for Christians, as demonstrated in several scriptures such as Genesis 28:12, Job 33:14-15, Psalm 126:1, and Acts 2:17, I was keen to observe how congregants would react when asked to envision the future of the church.

Design – Create what will be.

This is the stage where the 'positive core', the life-giving factors from the storytelling data, are identified. From the positive core, participants then develop statements that describe the future as if it already exists, called 'Provocative Propositions' (PPs). In this study, the PPs are referred to as 'This is Us' statements.

Destiny – Deliver what will be.

This is also known as the design stage, where actions are agreed to move towards the desired future described in the PPs.



Modified after Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2008.

Figure 2: Appreciative Inquiry 5D cycle

4.9 Developing a hybrid research approach

To ensure practical theology remained central to the study, I included a modified version of the TAR 'Guide to reading the data' and a reflective exercise with the Learning Hub members using the Four Voices of Theology. This modified approach to TAR aims to make the research project more acceptable in a congregation context where academic research may be met with some suspicion and resistance. I did not use an external group of academics within the TAR model to avoid the perceived feeling of scrutiny and critique of the participants highlighted during the pilot study. I recognised the potential constraints this approach could cause within the research methodology, but weighed this against the opportunity for greater congregational participation and decided that this offered a good way of achieving my aims.

4.9.1 Branding of the hybrid research model

Although choosing the 5D cycle of AI was a step towards finding an approach that would be acceptable to a congregation with limited exposure to academic research, I still believed that the terminology was not as clear or understandable as it could be. Informal discussions with several congregation members confirmed my initial views. As a newly established independent church, we had already developed the church's branding and logos for its various ministries in the 12 months prior to this study. After numerous discussions with congregation members from diverse backgrounds and ages, and incorporating input from

those with expertise in graphic design, the project evolved into 'Appreciating Theology' with the strapline 'Memories, Hopes and Dreams,' reflecting the AI approach of the study (See this logo in Appendix 1 Pg 128). The title Appreciating Theology was intentionally kept generic, with a specific subject title of 'Faith & Work' for this study. This approach allows the same title to be retained while enabling a different subject title if the Appreciating Theology model proves helpful and we choose to apply it to other areas of church life and culture in the future.

In conjunction with a small number of congregation members, I developed simple terminology that described different stages of the classical 5D AI cycle. With the advice of our graphic designer, four icons were developed to represent the stages of the model. Table 1 presents the original 5D cycle terminology and the terminology and stages developed for this research project.

Table 1: 5D Cycle terminology translated into the Appreciating Theology project terminology

5D AI Cycle Terminology	Appreciating Theology Project Terminology	Notes
Define	N/A	This is the subject area of the study that was defined prior to the commencement of the study during the first two years of the Professional Doctorate
Discover Dream	Let's Chat	Discovery interviews were renamed 'Let's Chat' to encourage engagement in storytelling rather than using the term interviews. Dream prompt questions were included in the storytelling stage
Design	Let's Learn	This stage involves identifying the learning provided by the storytelling data, achieved via a smaller group of congregational members in a Learning Hub. The data provides themes, described as the positive core of the organisation and from these mini-vision statements are crafted termed 'Provocative Propositions'
Destiny	Let's Do	This iterative stage requires the formation and initiation of actions to achieve the Provocative Propositions
	Let's Reflect	I added this stage to ensure that both theological and organisational learning reflections occurred

The bespoke model can be viewed diagrammatically, with an explanatory narrative, in Figure 3.

APPRECIATING THEOLOGY MODEL

Memories, hopes and dreams

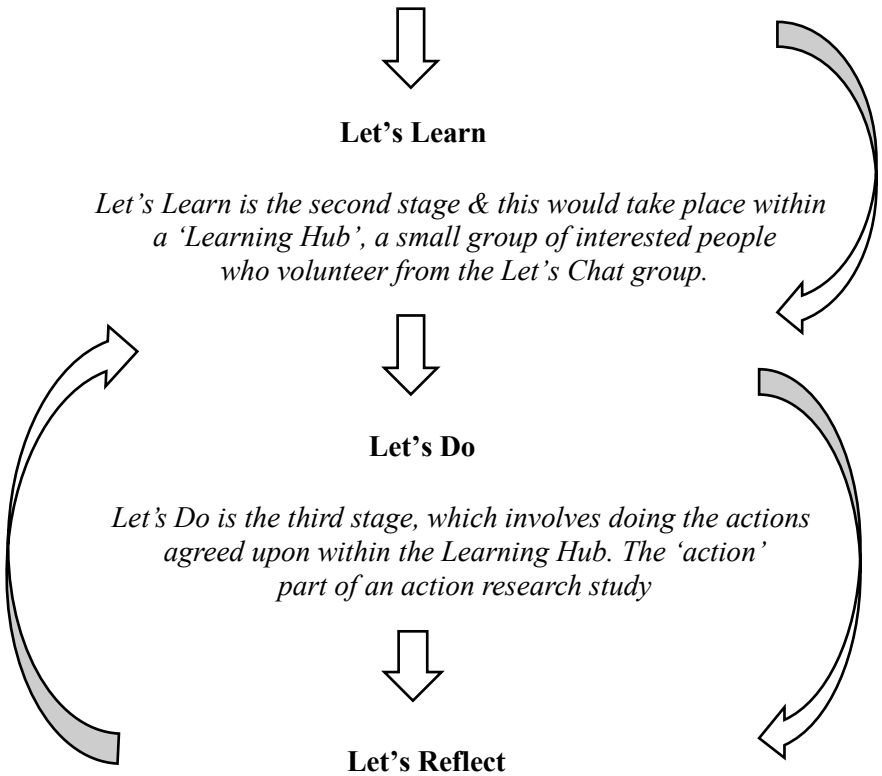
This is the overarching project/ model title, the strapline links to this title and reflects the research method Appreciative Inquiry, which is about sharing your memories, hopes & dreams

Focus - Faith & Work

This is the subject/focus of the Appreciating Theology model. For my thesis, the subject is Faith & Work, but the model could be applied to other subjects in the future, e.g., family, discipleship, and ministry.

Let's Chat

Let's Chat is the first stage in the research process with a large group of volunteers from the congregation in pairs doing 1:1 storytelling



Let's Learn

Let's Learn is the second stage & this would take place within a 'Learning Hub', a small group of interested people who volunteer from the Let's Chat group.

Let's Do

Let's Do is the third stage, which involves doing the actions agreed upon within the Learning Hub. The 'action' part of an action research study

Let's Reflect

Let's Reflect is the fourth stage of the action research cycle. LH members will complete a TAR & four voices reflection exercise. The Learning Hub members will also gather feedback from the wider congregation to reflect on whether the actions have made a difference. This then takes us back to 'Let's Do' to make any changes.

Figure 3: Appreciating Theology bespoke model

Simple icons were developed to identify the different stages of the model and used on any information or presentations to the church as shown in Figure 4 below:

Figure 4: Icons for the Appreciating Theology model's stages

The branding tools were used on social media, within the church, on all information and presentations, including those to the Church Board of Trustees. A Blog was also created to provide information and updates on the study for participants and other members of the congregation. These actions were important for fostering ownership and securing engagement with the research among the congregation. The branding elevated the study's profile within the church, and its related activities were easily recognisable.

Chapter 5: Method

This chapter describes the Let's Chat stage of the Appreciating Theology model, which encompasses the discovery & dream stages of the 5D AI cycle. Together, these form the methods employed in this study.

5.1 Study timeline

The study timeline is shown in Figure 5, which also highlights how the data were produced. The define stage of the AI process occurred before the commencement of the research, during the first two years of the Professional Doctorate programme. During this stage, the study's focus and research questions were developed to comply with university requirements for submitting a research proposal and obtaining ethical approval for the study.

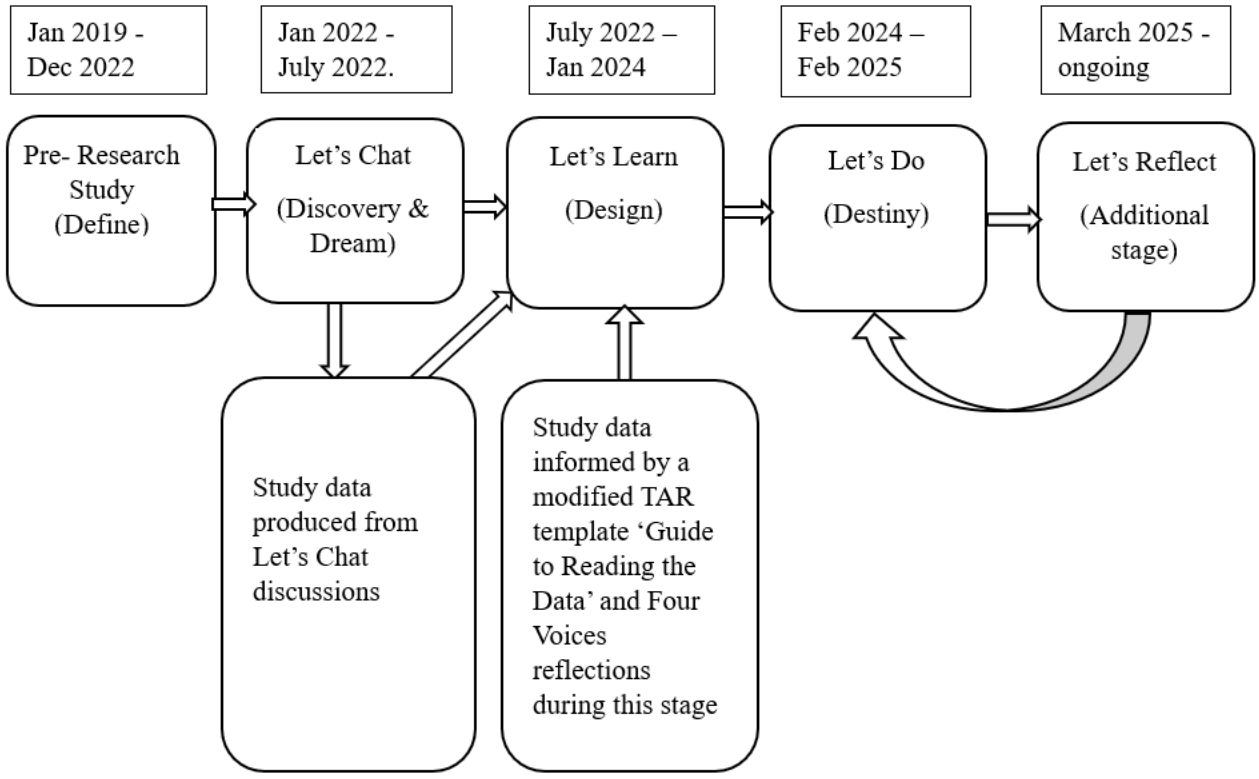


Figure 5: Research study timeline and data production

I had to be pragmatic and make practical decisions concerning the choice of methods and data collection as all those involved had limited time. None were full-time researchers, and I had to take the professional doctorate programme's timeline into consideration. The choice of methods and their execution had to account for any COVID-19 restrictions in place during parts of the study period.

5.2 Recruiting participants

Participants were voluntarily recruited from my congregation, an IP in North East England. All participants were over 18; there was no maximum age, as the study sought to include those who had retired. Within the congregation at the time of recruitment, 17% (n=8) were retired. The initial recruitment was to the Let's Chat stage, followed by a second round at the Let's Learn stage.

5.2.1 Recruitment to the Let's Chat stage

All participants were volunteers recruited following a church service where a presentation of the study had taken place. This was followed by an email from our database to the entire church. An informal online information session was held to explain the study, particularly the 'Let's Chat' storytelling stage, and to answer questions, without any commitment to respond. This could not be conducted in person due to COVID-19 restrictions at the time. We also recorded a 'demo' Let's Chat session using three of the actual prompt questions, hosted by me with a volunteer from the congregation sharing their story. This was recorded with consent and made available to the congregation to offer further insight and demonstrate how the storytelling stage of the study worked. The complete set of prompt questions, presented in Appendix 1, was given to participants at least two weeks before their Let's Chat session, to familiarise them with the process and to address concerns raised during the information session, such as it potentially feeling like an examination or a test of their theological knowledge.

At the time of recruiting participants, approximately 45 adults regularly attended the church, of which 34 (75.5%) volunteered to participate in the Let's Chat stage of the study. Of the 34 participants, 11 were male and 23 were female, reflecting the congregation's gender ratio, with an age range of 18 to 90 years. The volunteers came from diverse cultural and work backgrounds, including employed, self-employed, voluntary (including full-time homemakers and caregivers), and retired (n5). Current work roles included hospitality, industry, education, social care and healthcare, IT, retail, administration, human resources, undergraduate students, middle and senior management, trades such as building and plumbing, carers, parenting, foster care and volunteering. The 34 participants listed a total of 111 previous work experiences to date. Of the participants, one was from South Africa, one from Kenya, seven from Romania, and one from the USA. The

participants came to the Christian faith between 1 year and 74 years ago. While recruiting only volunteers may limit the voices heard, the representation from the congregation was broad, offering multiple perspectives and thereby providing credibility to the research results (White, et al., 2012).

The usual way to conduct Let's Chat storytelling sessions using an AI approach is in paired sessions, where one person tells their story with a paired partner, asking prompt questions and taking notes, then swapping roles. For this study, I described the person asking the prompt questions and making notes as the 'Host'. During discussions with participants, several were willing to tell their stories but did not want to act as hosts. To facilitate participation, I agreed that this would be possible. I, along with nine other volunteer hosts, facilitated all 34 storytelling sessions. The nine hosts both told their stories and acted as hosts.

5.2.2 Recruitment to the Let's Learn stage

During the recruitment process for the Let's Chat stage, the congregation were made aware that an opportunity would exist for those who might have the interest and capacity to participate in a group exploring the learning from the anonymised stories shared by others and planning the actions for the church to take forward. This was described as the Let's Learn stage of the study and would take the form of a smaller group, called a Learning Hub (LH), that would meet regularly, ideally monthly, for approximately 12 to 18 months.

An information leaflet was emailed to the church, and the opportunity to participate was offered during two church services. The role was described as joining me on a learning journey in a collaborative research project. The LH members were present to ground the research in reality, reflect the congregation's voices, and act as co-researchers.

Nine people chose to join the LH, more than I anticipated; seven of the nine had acted as hosts for the Let's Chat stage of the study, and all nine had shared their stories during this phase. The LH met 21 times over 19 months, consistently achieving full attendance. Only one person had to leave the Hub early due to personal reasons after attending 15 meetings over 12 months. The LH started with a meal, recognising members' commitment to attend straight from work or a busy daytime schedule, providing time to get to know each other and build friendships. The Hub sessions usually lasted 2.5 hours, including the meal and socialising. Online attendance options were available, but most preferred to meet in person, with poor weather being the only factor making online the preferred option. The demographic profile of the LH members is shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Profile of Learning Hub members in 2022

Participant	Age range at the time of joining LH	Approximate time a Christian	Approximate time at this church	Work Status	Current type of work or work history
1.	30-40 yrs	12 yrs	3 yrs	Employed	Professional career in the NHS and now in the private sector. Allied health professional expertise
2.	41- 50 yrs	30 yrs	3 yrs	Employed	Professional career in Social work. Approved Mental Health Professional
3.	30-40 yrs	26 yrs	12 months	Employed	Human Resources professional with experience across a variety of sectors from junior to senior level. Property management work at managerial level
4.	71- 80 yrs	49 yrs	18 months	Retired	Chartered librarian. Worked in Local government for 38 years, held very senior management-level roles. Trustee & previous Chair of church charities. Volunteer bible transcriber for an international charity
5.	61-70 yrs	30 yrs	2 yrs	Self employed	Private music tutor. Professional career – lecturer in music, performing arts and business. Semi-professional entertainer & church worship leader for 28 yrs. Area Board member of Aglow International
6.	61- 70 yrs	19 yrs	2 yrs	Employed	Range of experiences including Armed Forces, sales, admin, primary teaching, facilities and production. Previously self-employed
7.	51- 60 yrs	34 yrs	3 yrs	Self-employed	Landlady for 14 yrs. Professional career in legal & admin. Worked abroad for 5 yrs. Sports coach & umpire at County &

					National level. Macmillan Charity volunteer for 10 years
8.	41-50 yrs	15 years	3 years	Employed	Management in the hospitality industry. Full-time BA Theology student, Ministry Leader, Church Team Leader
9.	41-50 yrs	About 1-2yrs	Approx1-2yrs	University Student	University student, admin support, history of support worker with young offenders, vulnerable young people, union rep, and carer
10. (Researcher)	61 – 70 yrs	48 yrs	3 yrs	Retired & self-employed	Registered Nurse. Professional career. Worked in the NHS for 38 years & the Local Authority for 6 years. Executive-level experience. Volunteer Senior Pastor. Consultancy & patient advocacy work

5.3 Methods of data collection

Let's Chat discussions commenced in January 2022, with the majority completed by June 2022. Two interviews were undertaken later in 2022 due to participant availability. The storytelling sessions lasted, on average, 45- 60 minutes per person. The sessions were recorded via Zoom and transcribed via a secure, encrypted web-based program called Otter.ai.

During the remaining stages of the study, data were obtained from notes of discussions within the LH, flip charts and large graph sheets produced in the LH group work, and the completion of a collective analysis of the data using both the four voices of theology (Cameron, et al., 2010) and the 'Guide to reading the data' template developed by the TAR team (Cameron, et al., 2010). I also encouraged the LH participants to use a personal reflective journal to develop their reflective skills. Although this was a private journal, some participants shared their reflections within the LH discussions, which were noted and informed the reflections on the data and the next steps of the research. I recorded written reflexive accounts of my research journey, which provided further data. The methods bring data from various situations, scripture, traditions and Christian practices to understand God and human experiences within the context of this study.

5.4 Data analysis

This took place during the Let's Learn stage of the Appreciating Theology model. Using this hybrid AI and TAR model as the methodology, the traditional model of waiting until all the data is "safely gathered in", as described by Robson (2002, p. 386) was not an option; data collection and analysis were interwoven and not separated. Data from the storytelling sessions was analysed individually and collaboratively as a LH, and summaries were discussed with my research supervisors rather than using an academic outsider group as in the original TAR model. The analysis was inductive and latent, considering the participants' underlying subtexts and assumptions when developing the themes. This process was carried out manually until the final themes were identified, at which point Quirkos software was used to locate relevant quotes for each theme efficiently.

I checked and edited the automated transcripts of each storytelling session against the video recordings. This standardised the transcripts' format and allowed me to become immersed in the data. I recorded my initial reflections on the stories, which formed part of the content of my reflexive accounts and research diary.

As the edited transcripts became available, they were distributed to the LH members. The transcripts were released in three groups to the LH to manage the volume of information. Initially, each LH member received one transcript, allowing them to familiarise themselves with the analysis process and prevent overload. An example of an LH member's individual theme identification is shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Example of themes identified by an individual member of the Learning Hub

Q2. Tell me about a time when you have experienced that purpose in what you do as work

Theme	*Name & No.	*Line (s) ref	*Quote / Comment
Helping others	22 Sophia	135-136	'The research… is actually going to help schools, the government…'
Purpose in helping others	22. Sophia	139	'every single answer means something' [in the research]
Able to pray for others	22. Sophia	143	'I just felt so much love for them and even prayed over the data'
Not sure	01. Alice	253	' struggled to think at first'
Helping people	01. Alice	287	'Fighting to get people get access to educational resources'
Helping people achieve	01. Alice	301-302	'He had no GCSEs but eventually went on to university…'

At this stage of the data analysis, I held a group session with the LH to review an example of recognising their initial thoughts from the transcripts. A template was developed to assist in collecting the information. Initial themes were identified, and any relevant quotes supporting the theme were recorded. Items of interest, or those that might become themes once other transcripts were examined, were noted on a 'Parking Lot' sheet by each person for future reference.

Although this session went well and individuals began to capture their initial thoughts on their first transcript, when the LH met again, it was clear that people needed to become more confident in identifying initial themes. Some group members started to modify their themes after hearing others within the group. To help members gain confidence in identifying themes, we dedicated time at our next meeting to a question-and-answer session. I provided an example of themes identified from a Discovery Interview (the equivalent of our Let's Chat stories) from a different study. I also asked one of their peers within the group, who was more confident in identifying themes, to discuss their approach and how they handled any uncertain sections. This appeared to help, and I was then able to allocate the next set of transcripts to the group members. A third set was released the following month to give people time to identify themes in their previous transcripts. As a group, we referred to this as getting to know our people and their stories rather than analysing research data. Each member of the LH took responsibility for three transcripts, with four members volunteering to analyse an extra transcript. At this stage, the themes were identified from each question used in the Let's Chat discussions.

The next stage was to consolidate the themes identified by individual members of the LH to find common themes across all the transcripts, covering each question. To keep this manageable, I divided the LH members into two groups, allowing each to handle a manageable amount of data and enabling everyone to contribute. It is clear from the A3 graph sheets and flipchart work used by the groups that all members contributed and agreed on the common themes and relevant quotes from the transcripts. Examples of materials are shown in Figures 6, 7, 8 & 9 to demonstrate the collaborative approach of the study and how visual aids played an important role in helping the LH identify what was being learnt and expressed.

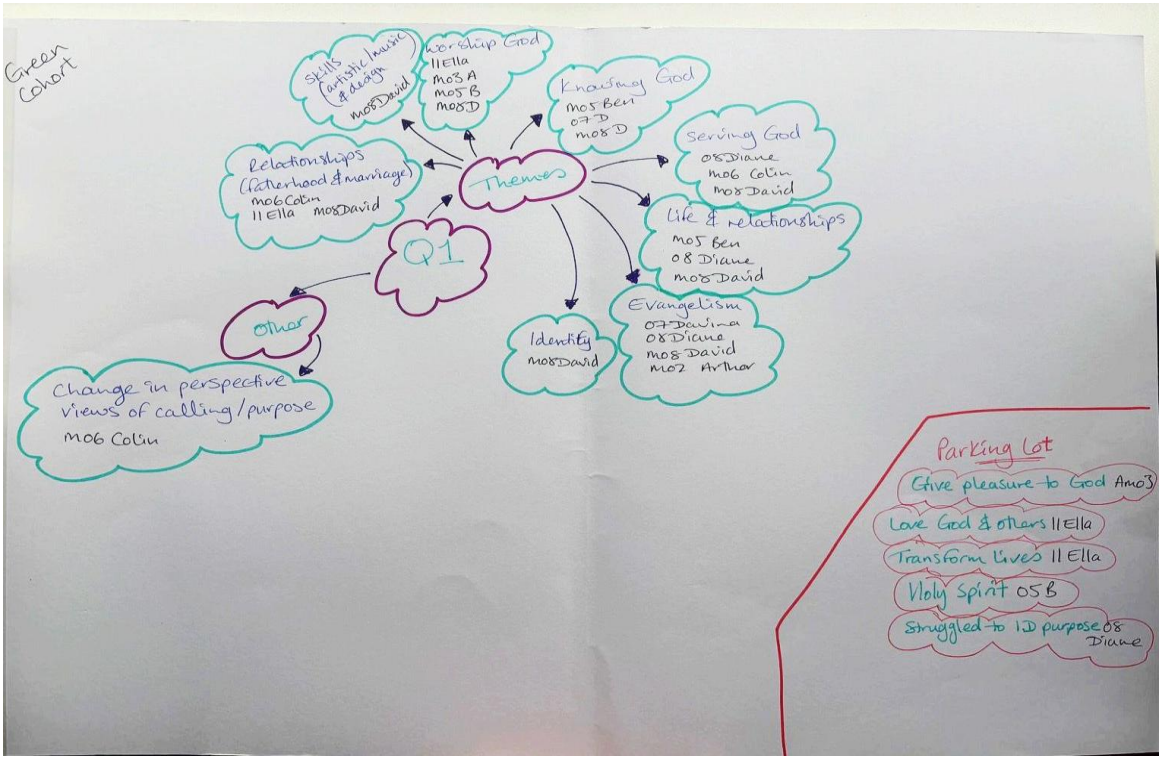


Figure 6: Example of themes identified for Q1 by a Learning Hub group

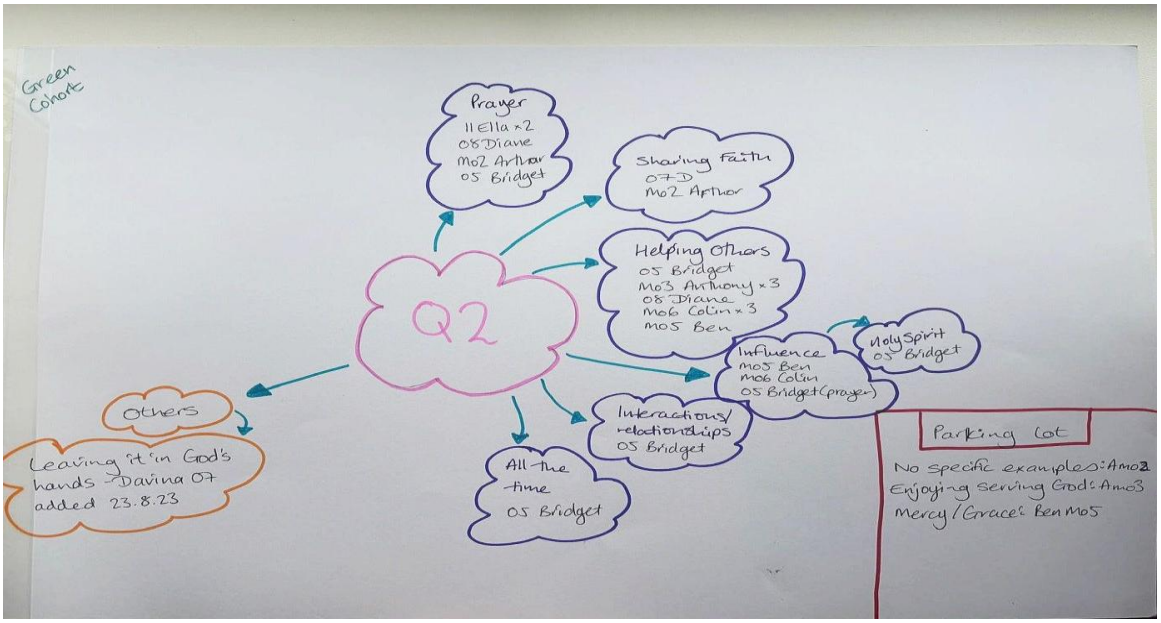


Figure 7: Example of themes identified for Q2 by a Learning Hub group

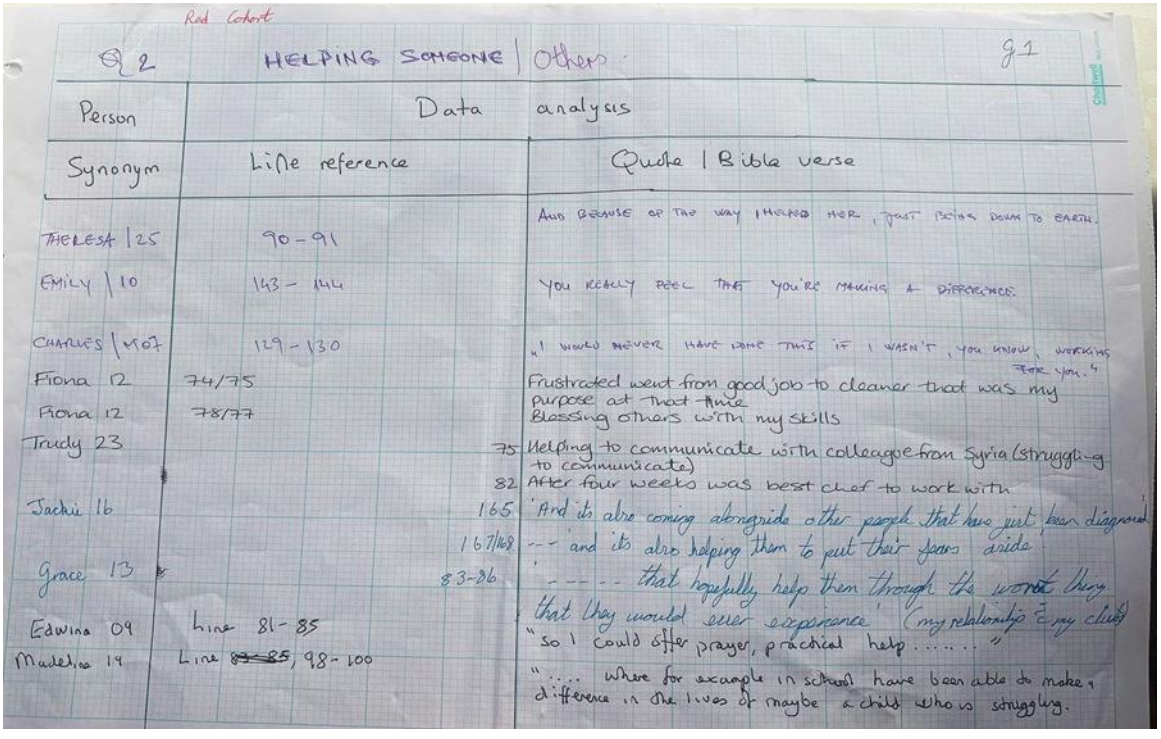


Figure 8: Example of a Learning Hub group capturing quotes for the 'helping' theme

The two sets of common themes were further verified by returning to the original transcripts to check the accuracy of the interpretation. The two sets of common themes were then reviewed to develop a single list of final themes without the boundaries of the Let's Chat questions, which, in AI terms, reflect the 'positive core', the organisational[4] strengths or root causes of success (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010). The final stage of the data analysis was a manual process conducted by the LH members as shown in Figure 9. The different colours of the paper represent the original Let's Chat question numbers.

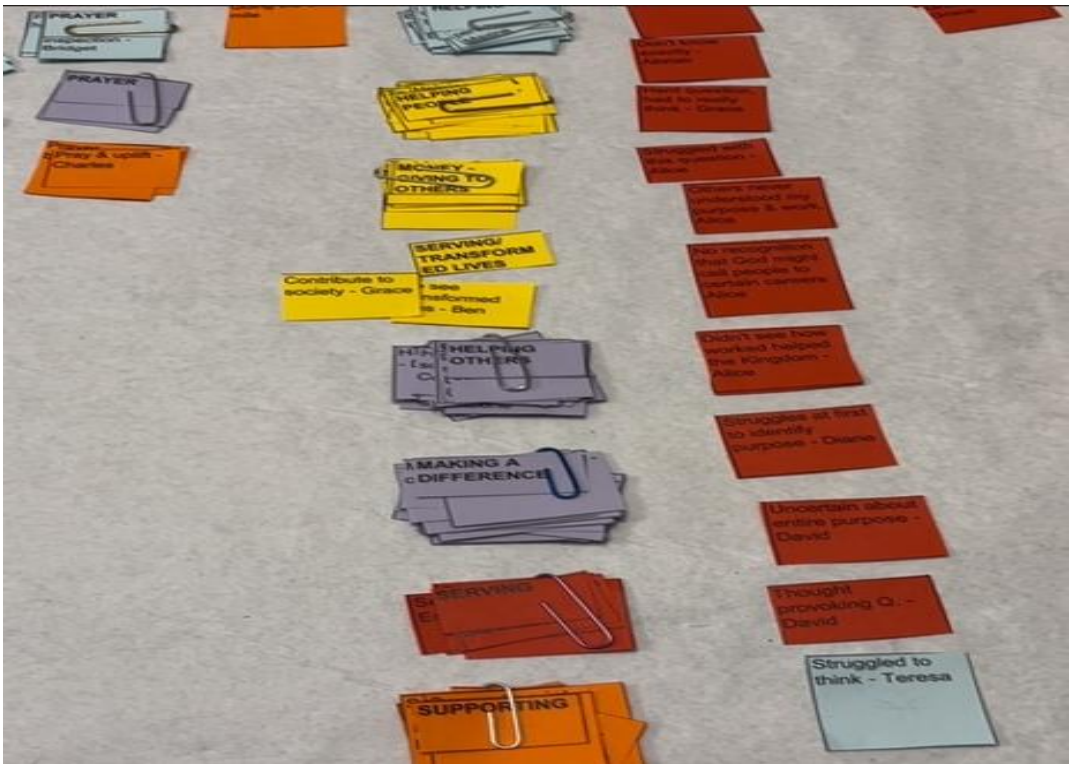


Figure 9: Image of manual grouping of the final themes by Learning Hub members

To ensure a focus on practical theology within the study, a 'Guide to Reading the Data' (Cameron, et al., 2010) template, found within the TAR methodology, was used by members of the LH for each of their transcripts to facilitate theological reflection. Each LH member completed a single four voices of theology template to reflect the four voices heard in their allocated transcripts. The information from both exercises informed and confirmed the data analysis process and the findings described in Chapter 6. The LH agreed

[4]The terms organisational or organisation refer to the church in this study context.

upon the final themes in December 2023. Figure 10 demonstrates the principal data analysis stages which shows how all stages were validated against original transcripts.

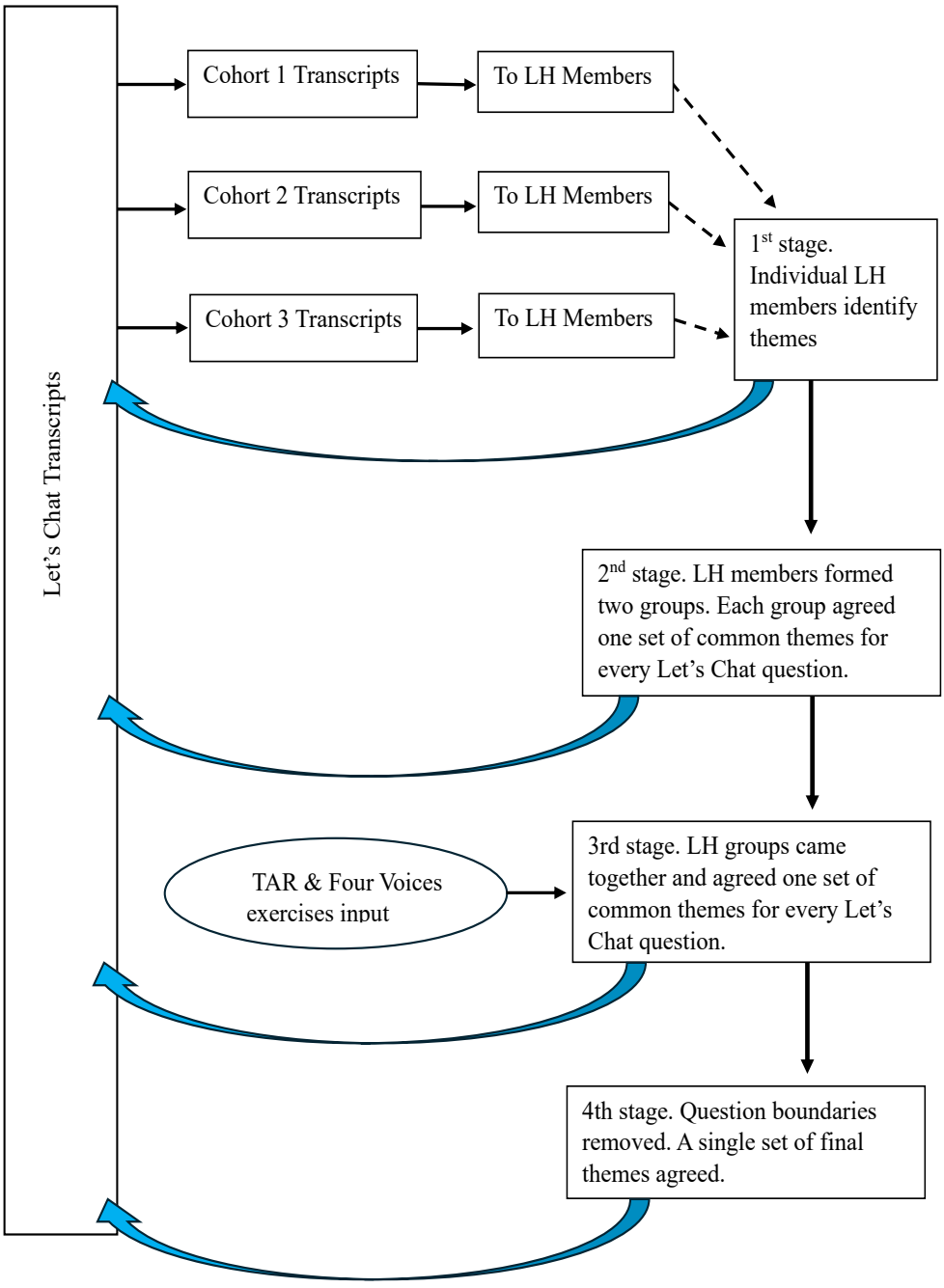


Figure 10: Diagram to show the stages of data analysis

At the third stage, the researcher entered the agreed single set of common themes per question and uploaded the transcripts into Quirkos data analysis software. The Quirkos tools enabled easy, efficient searches and data organisation. Once stage four was completed, the software was utilised to present a unified set of final themes. Figure 11 provides a screenshot of this process. The use of Quirkos provided a straightforward electronic audit trail of the data analysis process and the allocated data samples supporting the identified themes. The number of data samples for each theme is displayed below each circle, with some samples assigned to more than one theme. Quirkos was also used to determine which data findings contributed to answering the original research questions.

Figure 11: Screenshot of Quirkos entries of final themes

This completed the data analysis process, in preparation for identifying the learning from the study. The images demonstrate transparency in data analysis processes, enhancing the rigour needed in qualitative data analysis (White, et al., 2012). The visual representations produced by the LH provided an audit trail of decision-making regarding the data, further enhancing the transparency of the processes and adding to the trustworthiness of the study (Nowell, et al., 2017).

Chapter 6: What we learnt

This chapter draws on data from the Let's Chat storytelling sessions and the analysis conducted by LH members during the Let's Learn phase of the study. It illustrates how the transcripts from Let's Chat were utilised by the LH to identify key themes, which in turn informed the development of the 'Provocative Propositions' that underpin future actions.

6.1 Data analysis within the Appreciating Theology model

The data were gathered during the Let's Chat stage of the model, which incorporates the discovery and dream stages of the AI cycle. During this Let's Learn stage, the LH members and I organised the data into themes, aligning with the design stage of the 5D AI cycle. These themes then guided the development of Provocative Propositions, leading to the Let's Do stage of the Appreciating Theology model, which corresponds to the delivery stage of the 5D AI cycle, as described in the following chapter.

6.2 Final themes

The final 16 themes identified by the collaborative actions of the LH are described within four groupings:

A. What participants said about work and faith
B. Participant's spiritual thoughts about faith and work
C. Enablers – things that had helped participants in their faith and work experiences
D. The 'dream' items that participants wished to see in the church's future.

LH members observed that the more we consolidated the themes, the further we moved from participants' initial context in the Let's Chat transcripts. While 16 themes may seem many, they are arranged into four main groups, each addressing a specific aspect of the project. Groups A and B were derived from the core data and helped answer the research questions. Group C informed the action plan developed during the Let's Do stage, and themes in Group D were essential to the creation of the Provocative Propositions discussed later in this chapter.

The terminology for the themes was that used by participants, unless the LH members felt a more collective term could be used while still reflecting the original meaning. The temptation to use more 'spiritual' or 'academic' terminology was resisted in most cases. A summary of all the themes and sub-themes is listed in Table 4.

Table 4: All final themes and sub-themes

Grouping		Final themes and sub-themes			
		A1. Flourishing	**A2. Helping Others**	**A3. Bringing Change**	**A4. Using Skills**
A	What participants said about work	Provision Purpose Significance Fulfilment Achievement Feeling Good	Serving Supporting Difficult situations	To people's lives in the world around us	Practical skills People skills Character skills
		B1. Sense of Purpose	**B2. Spiritual**	**B3. A Whole of Life Faith**	**B4. Sharing my Faith**
B	Spiritual thoughts about work	God's guidance Obedience Serving God Calling	Love God Demonstrate God's love for people Model Christian values and principles Ministry Holy Spirit Worship Word of God Prayer	Having a 24/7 faith Sacred-secular divide	Evangelism
		C1. Resources	**C2. Connection**		
C	Enablers	Preaching/teaching Ministers/leaders Courses	Relationships Home groups Mentorship Testimonies		
		D1. Culture	**D2. Growth**	**D3. Places for Real-life Discussions**	**D4. Sundays**
D	Dreams	Encouragement Welcoming Inclusivity Outward facing	Teaching faith and work Advice Mentorship	Groups Workshops	The whole of life is ministry Actions from this research
		D5. Testimony	**D6. Spiritual**		
		How to be a Christian in the workplace How to share my faith in the workplace	Prayer Holy Spirit The Word of God Worship		

6.3 Five areas for discussion

This thesis will discuss five overarching areas in detail, accompanied by relevant data extracts from the transcripts, referenced by the participant's pseudonym[5]. This provides context and examples of meaning from the data, as proposed by Braun & Clark (2006). The five areas were identified by their depth and, to some degree, frequency of discussion and reflective thoughts by the LH and my reflections as both a researcher and a church leader. The five key areas are presented in the positive, current tense style of appreciative inquiry.

6.3.1 God has a purpose for my life

Participants either know or wish to know their God-given purpose. Some participants were very clear about God's purpose for their lives, and it was important to them to know that their lives had purpose. Arthur was one such person:

> I feel like the Holy Spirit and God have been speaking to me about purpose. And that kind of, for me, personally, at the moment, I think that I acknowledge that the Holy Spirit lives inside of me, and that God is active and living inside of me. And so, I think the purpose of that is to acknowledge that wherever I go, wherever I go, I'm bringing the Kingdom of God with me. So I think the purpose is to bring God into every situation where I find myself, whether that's in church, whether that's in the workplace, whether that's in the home, is actually where I find myself where God has placed me. I have the kingdom of God within me, and therefore I can, my purpose is to bring that to help others.

This study was set within a Pentecostal church. However, Arthur was one of only a minority of people who could articulate the Holy Spirit's involvement in their everyday lives, particularly in their work. He also grasps that his purpose is connected to something bigger than himself, bringing the Kingdom of God into his daily life.

Other participants may not have known what God's purpose was for them, but they were eager to discover it. Alistair, a Christian for over 30 years, working in a senior professional role, exemplifies this:

> I really started thinking about it because this is such a deep question, and I've been a Christian for 30 years. And one, you would think, I should really know by now. What is your purpose or your calling? What is God's calling? Because the purpose is kind of almost destiny. So I don't necessarily know exactly what, if I were just to look at the word purpose on its own, I would think purpose, destiny. And I don't necessarily know exactly what my destiny is specifically… So my purpose in that sense,

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5 Only minimal spelling and grammatical adjustments were made to the transcript quotes to assist readability.

> when I read that question, the way I read it, it was What's God's calling for your life? In that context, I read the purpose. So I started thinking along those lines. I might be wrong…

Alistair goes on to respond:

> And I don't know, would be my first answer… And I think that, you know, knowing that for certain must be such a fulfilling, it must be… And there have been times in my life when I thought I knew. And I think I did know at that time, …it's such a fulfilling and empowering thing to really know God's call and God's purpose, it really doesn't matter what goes on, you have a mission. And you're in that mission. And that drives you because you know, you're called by God. And that's a really beautiful thing when you discover. At the moment? I don't know exactly. So trying to discover that, really. And to really work with that, to lean into the Lord and to hear and to find out.

At the time of his inclusion in the study, Alistair held various volunteer roles in the church whilst also working as a full-time senior practitioner in a highly valuable secular position. This raises further questions about how to help the people of God recognise other areas of ministry in their lives that may not conform to a traditional church role or function. Several participants who were unsure of their purpose struggled because they could not attach their purpose to a recognised role in the church, such as Alice, a retired senior local authority professional:

> It is interesting because it's actually something I struggled with all my early Christian life, perhaps quite a lot late into my Christian life, because I wasn't sure what God had called me to. It never crossed my mind that you might have called most of the work I was doing my purpose. I was waiting for some sort of divine revelation as to what my purpose might be. And I always thought it would be something in church.

This has implications for how we view calling and ministry and possibly reflects the Pentecostal emphasis on the five-fold ministry gifts (Ephesians 4:11).

Some participants used the term ‘ministry’ in their descriptions of purpose, calling and work activities. This is not surprising, as the term is frequently used in Pentecostal churches, but usually in relation to the five-fold ministry mentioned in Ephesians 4:11 or church-related activities. Interestingly, Ben, who had previously worked in paid ministry roles within Pentecostal churches, now states that he finds greater fulfilment and purpose in his secular role as a foster carer. Ben also articulated this view, which resonated with members of the LH who had been long-standing members of Pentecostal churches:

> I grew up in a pastor's home, so I've heard many, many messages. But I'll be honest with you, up until recently, most of the things that I've heard about ministry have pointed to serving the Lord, serving in the church, you know, the ministry was what you did …while church was going on. And most Sundays, I spend some time on a stage, …leading worship or something, …I do appreciate those opportunities very, very much just to serve God's people in that way. But to be honest, it's only since we've been under Pastors (names), that I've really heard that, that's not true I've heard that as a

> principle before, it wasn't a new principle, but just the kind of the real priority of the fact that the majority of ministry, by far the vast majority of ministry doesn't happen on a church stage. And it's really helped us, it's helped us absolutely massively. Because sometimes what we do, what we particularly do for a living, it does sometimes hinder us from being involved in some of the church activities, which in the past would have been presented to me as a problem, you know, you made a poor choice, if what you do for a living, stops you from being, you know, at something midweek. But I've been constantly reminded that ministry is what we do every day. And then the outflow of that, the culmination of the week, is when we all then come together and rejoice about what God's done in our lives…

Ben makes a significant point in his story, that at one time, if you chose work that meant you could not attend a mid-week church activity, or it included working Sundays, then that would be seen as a poor choice. Grace makes a similar point when recounting the espoused theology that 'the whole of life was viewed as ministry' in a Pentecostal church she had attended. However, her experience was that she faced a critical response from leaders when her work, which she considered 'ministry,' caused her to be late for a church mid-week activity, suggesting a difference in their operant theology.

Alice's story, along with others, implies there is a hierarchy of work roles, with work within the church seen as sacred, therefore of a higher purpose, and those outside of the church viewed as secular and therefore of lesser importance:

> I think the reason I struggled with my purpose is because I was waiting for the goal, you know, to something significant, it never crossed my mind I might be in it. And also that calling to something like say preaching and various things, can run alongside being called to be in local government, or whatever. I think that would have helped me, and I think it helps current generations to realise that we're not saying that if you're, say, a website developer or something like that, that that doesn't matter. That's actually part of God's call. I can't articulate it very well. But it's, it's that what I've heard you and others call 'whole life', it's recognising I don't suddenly become more of a Christian on Sunday.

In several stories, there was an implicit hint at a sacred-secular divide, even if that terminology was not explicitly used. The sacred/secular divide is not restricted to Pentecostalism; it exists in many streams of faith with deep roots in philosophy, history and anthropology (Buxton, 2007). The prevalence in Pentecostalism is possibly linked to the historic roots within the Holiness Movement. Finding a balance between robust participation in God's world and not migrating towards assimilation with the world is a practical challenge.

Several other participants were also unsure about their purpose, but like Isaac, they implied that having the opportunity during this study to talk and reflect on it helped them recognise what their purpose might be:

> I don't think I've figured it out. I mean, I couldn't just pinpoint like with certainty, well, this is my purpose. I suppose in more general terms, …I suppose figuring out, well, the gifts that are, that we're

> all given, and I suppose our passions, our gifts, and what to do with those would perhaps constitute a part of that purpose for our lives... But apart from that, I don't know. I mean, be a good friend, be a good listener. Be a good father, be a role model for my children. Love God, obey and praise God.

As mentioned by Isaac, an important aspect of understanding that God has a purpose for participants' lives was recognising the skills, attributes, and abilities that God has given them, which help them achieve that purpose. Participants were asked to verbalise these during the Let's Chat discussions. The responses have been expressed as word clouds, detailed below in Figures 12, 13 & 14. This was one of the most inspirational aspects of the study, as it demonstrated in visual form the remarkable range of skills among the 34 participating members of the congregation. These word clouds were shared with the congregation as part of a Sunday service update on the research and achieved a very positive response.

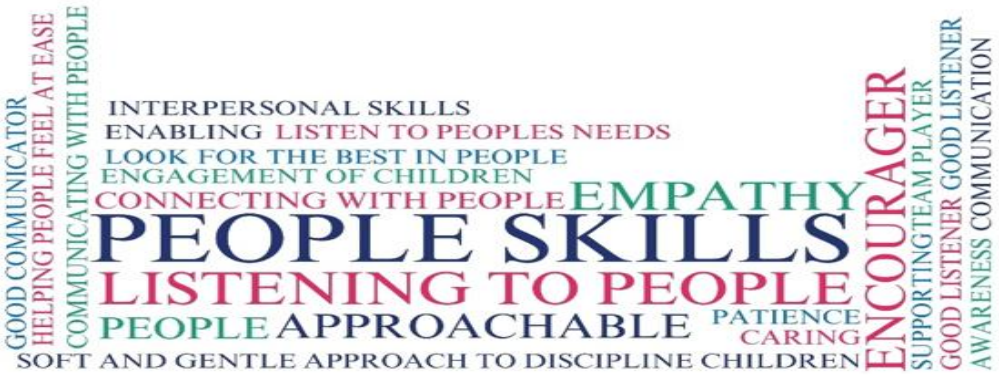

Figure 12: People skills

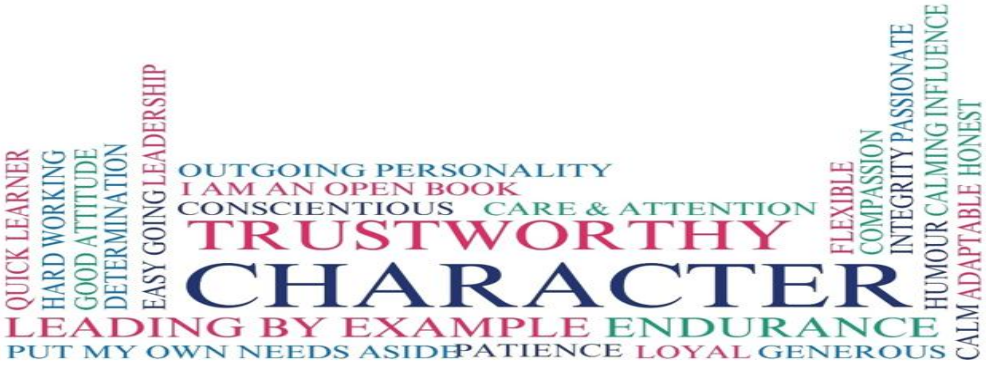

Figure 13: Character attributes

Figure 14: Practical skills

Although they were aware of their skills, some participants still struggled to articulate their purpose. Maxine exemplifies those who were still looking for their purpose: “I don’t know. I really don’t know. I’ve never found it, maybe I just haven’t found it yet”. Maxine’s comments reflect those of several congregants, as if God’s purpose is ‘out there somewhere’ and we must go and ‘find it’, much like a game of hide-and-seek.

Several participants used the term ‘calling’ when discussing their purpose. Alice was clear that she had not thought of her work as her calling or vocation. “... we've talked about the fact that I didn't see my work as a vocation, or a calling. I think I undervalued what God has given me.” She then went on to express a divide between secular work and full-time ministry:

> Nobody ever said it, but I felt they were not better, but that was the highest calling, you know, to give it all up for Jesus. Whereas somebody like me, who was working, nobody ever made me feel second best, but I just felt it wasn't in the same class. as being full-time for the Lord. I think taking a step back and actually recognising that whatever anybody does, with their whole time, matters. Whether you're a full-time parent or carer, whether you're in the working environment as I was, whatever you do, it's of value because you're of value. It's important, and it should be seen as part of God's calling to you. He might be calling you to be an architect, God might be calling you to be a cleaner, or any one of the hundreds of valuable jobs there are out there. I'm continually grateful for the people who do things like empty the bins and stuff like that because, actually, life doesn't run very well without all these people. And so I think it's something about valuing all work and recognising that it can be part of your calling.

Alice concluded by making an important point, perhaps we are viewing this from the wrong perspective: “Do we need to take a step back and acknowledge that what everyone does matters and is part of their calling?” This raises a question for Pentecostal Christians regarding our earthly actions and their eternal value.

Sophie refers to the importance of what she does now, not just about eternity "I think it finally clicked with me that God put me on the earth not to kind of just be expectant of the end of finally being with him, but actually to work in this world". No one explicitly mentioned their eschatological beliefs regarding the value of secular work. Still, in many stories, participants reconsidered their views on the value of their current actions. As discussed in Chapter 2, there remains a view amongst Pentecostals that this earth will be destroyed, and the new heaven and earth (Revelation 21) will not be a continuation of the current one. Therefore, everything will be destroyed, including the efforts of our work. Whilst this position is no longer commonly preached, it will be remembered by several participants in this study. Taking the eschatological view that there will be continuity between the current earth and the new one, and that for Christians, our ultimate destiny is that new, redeemed and transfigured earth (Marshall & Gilbert, 1998; Dover, 2011; Whelchel, 2019b) has the potential to change our understanding of the eternal value of our current work (Charles, 2023). Exploring the eschatological beliefs of the congregants and my own may help take forward the actions from this study.

Regarding the question of calling, the insights from the Saltley Trust Report, 'What Helps Disciples Grow,' could be helpful. The report author, Simon Foster, observes, "is not just a hypothetical idea, but it is very often an experience: 56% of those who took part in our survey rate 'a direct call or experience I believe was from God' as helpful to their journey of faith" (Foster, 2016, p. 5). Reflection on what is conducive to congregants experiencing that call for themselves and the role of the gathered church in creating that conducive environment will inform the practical actions to be pursued.

6.3.2 I am here to make a difference

Participants believe that making a difference to others and their community is important. There were numerous examples within the stories of participants making a difference in people's lives, either directly through their work roles or indirectly through conversation, practical support, or prayer for colleagues, neighbours, and customers/clients. They felt this reflected Jesus to those around them.

Grace tells an inspiring story of how her work as an Allied Health Professional, working as a Case Manager, made a difference in the life of a young man:

> I guess, one of the, one of the more satisfying or where I felt, yeah, most good about work was one of my clients… a man in his 30s who had a catastrophic brain injury as a result of a road traffic accident. He is probably one of the most challenging clients that I've ever had to work with; he is incredibly verbally abusive and exhibits some physical aggression. And I had to coordinate care therapies, I couldn't keep stuff in there, he just hated the world and everybody in it, he was so angry. And it was incredibly difficult to reason with him because of his brain injury… And we had, obviously, expert witnesses involved as part of the litigation process, who, even they who had 20/30 years experience

> on me, were going, oh, my goodness, we've never really seen anybody quite like this… And it had these really reputable experts saying, You're doing a good job. And I had to set up this case conference solicitors with all of these experts just looking at me, and the barrister looking at me and the litigation solicitor looking at me, and I was actually pregnant and couldn't tell anyone and I had the most horrendous cold, the meeting started at five o'clock at night in Leeds and I had to be there till stupid o'clock that night and it was really hard and the barrister it was like being on trial, they were grilling me, and it was hard. And what felt good is that I knew that case, inside out and everything they said, because they try to tear you apart. It felt so good to know that I knew what I was doing, and I felt confident in my clinical decision-making for that man, and I had to do a lot of thinking. Ultimately, his case settled for a substantial sum of money… But to think that I've done something like that was, you know, when you see these people that have gone from this, and then one day, everything changes, you know, you don't want to see people suffer and have to scrape for every penny they can get. And it's nice to know that you know, I know he's not happy. I know, he's never going to be as he was, but at least he'll still be safe and cared for from scratch.

The data included significant examples of retirees, asking God about their daily purpose and sharing stories of how they were making a difference to those around them. Edwina was one such retiree who offers an example of how she serves God without holding a paid job:

> …usually at the end of my prayer time on a morning, you know, I've prayed for other people, but I just usually ask the Lord to help me fulfil what he's prepared for me to do today. But then I've got to be prepared to listen and lay down any plans that I've got. And then again, just look to serve in those areas, you know, maybe somebody lands on the doorstep or something happens. Be prepared to think right, you know, not lay down what somebody else has got going, but lay down my plans to do whatever. And I think basically now just being with people, so many people need time, they just need your time, …now I'm at a stage where I've got the time to be there for people to listen to people.

Contributions from retirees were particularly valuable in this study, as our aim was to maintain a broad definition of ‘work’. Barbara, another retiree, talks of assisting others in practical ways before attempting to introduce them to faith in Jesus. Evangelism is central to Pentecostal theology, and there was a time when introducing people to a salvation experience was considered far more important than meeting a practical need. This was not the case in this study; several participants reported providing practical help before sharing their faith with others. There were some workplace stories that featured a mix of bringing people to faith in God through the prayer of salvation, sharing with others how participants came to faith, or sowing seeds for evangelism. Some participants felt they needed assistance with sharing their faith in the workplace, especially in our pluralistic society.

There were several stories with specific examples of helping people in difficult situations. Colin, a law lecturer, gives this example of helping someone in a very difficult situation:

> I'm teaching a student now who's from Ukraine. You know, she shared with me on Monday that she is in the UK, and her family is still there. She told me on Monday that she's lost, they've lost everything. She's going to need a lot of support and listening and communicating. But I can do very little else for

> her other than help her with her subject and listen, that's the best way I can hopefully help her to still succeed in spite of everything that's going on around her. In the hope that if she is successful, she will see in the future, a different world where she can actually make a bigger contribution and make a difference. It's not me helping her build a home in her home state. Yeah, I've never had that before; of all the problems I have had when students come to me, my country is a war zone I've never had that before.

Several participants recounted their experiences promoting change in their local communities, workplaces, and society. An example was Alice, working in local government in an area with significant deprivation, who shared several instances in which she had to challenge the views of senior colleagues who believed that all community members had computers, could afford to order books from Amazon, and had access to other learning opportunities. She played a crucial role in providing access to education and the resources needed to improve people's life chances. Although she does not explicitly use the term, her advocacy and participation in discussions about equality of access and, in some respects, justice are clear in her stories. Pentecostals have not historically been associated with social justice issues. I would concur with Edwards (2011) that there has been a maturing and a move to engagement with the world around us, but there remains minimal teaching within the Pentecostal church on social ethical issues (Kurt, 2024).

Other examples of congregants making a difference to individuals and the wider world, encompassing their local communities and society, were also evident. Betty shared several stories from her work with young offenders, Anthony spoke about supporting managers dealing with difficult human resource issues, Jackie discussed her role in a cancer support charity, and Emily talked about her work with female prisoners. The stories reflected a wide range of spheres in which congregants had influence, including foster care, mental health, learning disability services, the building trade, and many more. To those of us reading these stories, it was evident that God was ministering through people and that the Holy Spirit was guiding them through very complex and sensitive situations. As members of the LH and I discussed, these stories might have remained untold, and the wisdom gained unshared had there not been a space created for them.

These stories reflect a sense of purpose in participants' lives. The Saltley Trust Report, 'Responding to God', found that "Most of those who expressed a strong sense of purpose in life also believed that God had a purpose for them" (Jones & Turner, 2022, p. 19). Exactly how these are related, they admit, requires further exploration, and may be something we could explore.

6.3.3 Whatever my work, God is in my story

When given the chance to talk and reflect, participants with diverse work experiences could recognise God's presence in their daily lives. It seemed easier for participants in professional roles, such as

teachers, nurses, and social workers, to quickly provide examples of God's presence in their work. Davina described her sense of achievement when, as a Family Contact worker, she helped a father from another country navigate the complexities of social care so he could have contact with his children. Ben described the sense of achievement he feels as a foster carer when a baby considered unsuitable for adoption makes significant progress while in his home and subsequently gets adopted.

Encouraging those involved in other types of work to perceive their contributions as meaningful proved somewhat more challenging. With encouragement and a little time to reflect during the Let's Chat discussions, Isaac, a food delivery person, told a story that was very significant for a family. He described a loophole that some customers have found, where they can order food outside the three-mile radius around their home, which is the delivery limit. Often, these are scam orders in which the delivery person ends up in the middle of nowhere, miles outside their area. Isaac told a story, which he describes as "heartbreaking", where he decided to go outside of his delivery area and the impact of his decision:

> So I get there and this, and I take the food out. There were a couple of bags of food and some drinks, and this woman approached from the backyard. So I shout, "Hello, is anybody there?" I wait, and a woman is slowly making their way to the gate, and I can see through. She didn't open the gates, I just passed it over the fence. And you can see that she was bruised and bloodied and battered, and her face was quite beaten and stuff. There were kids in the house, and I could hear them. I just passed the bags of food and drinks, and she said Thank you for coming all the way. I said that's okay, no problem, absolutely fine. Yeah, so that was one of the most memorable times, which I think, well, really happy that I did this, really happy that it was me that had to do it, because maybe those kids would have gone hungry that day. I don't know, whatever. So that's definitely one of the situations that come to mind.

Other examples include Alice, a local authority professional who recognised that the bids and advocacy role they undertook to provide access to education for individuals in areas of social deprivation had made a significant difference to people. For example, a young man from a very deprived background who gains entry to university through the Open Learning project she established as part of her work. Helping congregants to view their work as purposeful, making a difference, and Holy Spirit-influenced has been an important part of the journey in this study.

When asked about her work, Madeline, a young adult and primary school teacher, shared her early perceptions of how serving in church and being part of the church truly reflects God's work. She believed that those whose work was within the church were viewed as more important and valuable. She then discusses her evolving beliefs alongside her father's experience, as he transitioned from working for Christian organisations to operating in a secular environment:

> Yeah, it might be easy to answer on the other side, because I think some church experiences that I've had kind of made you feel like if you weren't serving in church, then you weren't doing God's work. And if you weren't at church all the time, you weren't doing God's work, or if you weren't, you know, bringing people to church that wasn't doing God's work either. And I think for a long time, I kind of felt like the role of the people in church was much more important and are much more fruitful, or much more valuable than other things. But again, that opinion kind of has changed in the last couple of years. I think actually, the turning point was probably my placements where I saw how much need there was for the children in school and teachers …how difficult those children's lives are at such a young age. And a lot of it wasn't their fault, for me to actually be like a constant, steady person in their life, when often they didn't have that. Again, being able to make a difference. Where children have maybe low aspirations, because of the family background or things actually being able to make a difference to them by speaking good things into their lives or speaking to them in positive ways, and actually helping them when they've for example, not being able to read and write very well at the end, you know, making that progress and actually normal, and that's gonna have a big difference in their lives. I think I realised, actually, there is a lot of work that can be done and is very valuable in the workplace. And again, being able to speak to staff. I mean, an example is my dad, he'd for 20/30 years also only worked in Christian areas, Christian companies, and I always thought, oh, that must be so great. And it was it was great. But then, actually, he spoke to us about that as well. When he moved into a kind of a, you know, a secular work area, he, again, realised how many people you could actually speak to and impact that he would never come across in his everyday life. And I've had many opportunities to speak to my work friends …some have grown up Christians, some have not at all, some would say they are Catholic, but then, you know, there's, there's a lot of different beliefs. Some very against it …I've always just been open from the start, yeah, I go to church, I'm a Christian, I believe this, they notice that I don't do certain things that they do and things, and I've never kind of been pushy or forceful but people do end up having conversations about their lives. I'm able to just be open and say, Oh, well, actually, this is what I believe. And yeah, it's really great to be able to have those conversations.

Once again, there was a perception, certainly in her early experiences in IP churches, of a sacred-secular divide with church activities appearing superior to secular roles and responsibilities.

The idea that participants' actual work has value was not immediately clear. How their work aligns with God's creation mandate (Genesis 1:26-28) to steward the world (Cosden, 2005) is an area needing further exploration. Although there was some recognition that their work was part of God's plan for their lives, no one specifically referred to their work as part of God's plan, his *Missio Dei* (Newbigin, 1989; Newbigin, 1995; Keller, 2012; Gage, 2021). Perceiving their work as part of God's plan to redeem this world was not apparent.

6.3.4 Others grow when I share my experiences and wisdom

Participants highly valued hearing the wisdom and experiences of their peers on living their lives as Christians in the workplace, compared to most of the participants' past experiences of courses or preaching about this aspect of life. This was not to say that some courses and preaching had not been helpful; the work

of the LICC and its courses and materials were valuable, as were some sermons delivered by local ministers and guest speakers at conferences.

Bridget, in particular, had been in a Pentecostal church in 2004 when they were part of the LICC Imagine Church programme, which is promoted for "churches seeking to make disciples for all of life" (The London Institute for Contemporary Christianity, 2015). Diane had attended a different Pentecostal church, where they did the LICC Fruitfulness on the Frontline course, which explored "the rich ways God works in and through us right where we are" (The London Institute for Contemporary Christianity, 2014). Diane felt that the course had really "opened her eyes" to her frontline and to the fact that her ministry is where she is now, where she spends most of her time.

Several stories emphasised the importance of personal connections and interactions in helping individuals navigate their faith and work situations. Colin suggested setting aside time to hear from others about "How to be Christ-like in this modern workplace." He and others proposed workshops, home groups[6] and hearing testimonies from peers on Sundays as examples of spaces where peer voices could be heard. Gerald reflected on how beneficial it was to attend a small midweek home group and to get to know others outside the Sunday service. He believed that the discussions with fellow group members helped him gain a better understanding of what it means to be a Christian in his work life. Fiona spoke about the support she received from peers in a small group during a particularly difficult time:

> They were people that were just like us, …sinners with all sorts of problems that were around us and building us up every single week through those connect groups.

Alistair shared similar experiences from a small group he attended, where participants discussed their challenging times and the support they received from peers. Colin saw small groups as environments where people were more likely to discuss their successes and perceived failures regarding faith and work. The focus was on real-life discussions and the practical application of Christian beliefs.

Participants recognised the value of fellow Christians sharing their practical wisdom and life experiences but did not always see the worth of their own stories. One of the benefits of this AI process has

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[6] Participants used different terms for mid-week groups, which usually meet in homes or local coffee shops, such as home groups, connect groups and kingdom groups, which is the term used by the church involved in this study.

been the journey towards personal recognition, where all participants had something to contribute to the Christian growth of others.

This realisation is important for my leadership role. Instead of seeing my role as simply pouring into people and, in many cases, telling them what to believe, it shifts to one where I draw out the wisdom and experience of those who are living faithfully for the benefit and growth of others, and, of course, myself. This complements the work of Butler (2023a), an exploration of discipleship and learning in UK Methodist Churches, which suggests discipleship is more about mutual accompaniment, walking alongside rather than a hierarchical form of disciple and discipler.

It also has wider implications for the organisation of church activities, creating space for more peer-to-peer interactions. This paradigm shift of learning from peers could become a relational form of discipleship similar to that described by Wilterdink (2016) in his work with youth in the USA United Methodist Churches. His work focuses on everyday people seeking to "honor God and love their neighbor every day" (Wilterdink, 2016, p. 9), which resonates with the ethos of this study.

These findings open a broader discussion on discipleship and the term 'faith learning' mentioned by Butler (2020; 2023a). These studies suggest that faith learning occurs not through formal church courses but through the informal, conversational activities of congregants about everyday life. This is a very different discipleship approach for an IP church, yet it seems to reflect the participants' experiences in this study.

6.3.5 The gathered church helps me live my scattered life

Sundays and other church activities should clearly focus on equipping people to live their lives as Christians daily. Participants shared, during the dream question of the Appreciating Theology model, inspiring examples of how Sunday services and other church activities could support their everyday Christian lives. They particularly valued the 'This Time Tomorrow' (TTT) interviews with congregation members. They sought practical, Bible-centred teaching and worship that demonstrated how they could live in the week ahead. Holy Spirit ministry was about empowering congregants for life from Monday to Saturday. Although only Alice and Charles used the term 'whole of life', many participants described a future church that recognises all of life as a form of ministry and believes this should be at the heart of our Sunday services. Bridget felt that what she described as "whole-life discipleship" is the "big hinge…" to equip believers to live their whole lives for Christ and should be a key part of the future church. Ella felt that living our whole lives for Christ was currently acknowledged and wanted to ensure this was explicit in the Sunday services of the church of the future.

The importance of testimony, once very prevalent in Pentecostal churches, was emphasised, not just testimonies of salvation as was the norm, but also of experiences in people's daily lives. Testimonies of how people had navigated situations as Christians and how they had experienced the Holy Spirit in those circumstances. Some participants, such as Harry, did want to hear testimonies of how evangelism could be achieved, reflecting the Pentecostal emphasis on evangelism:

> And I think it's really helpful in church to share testimonies of people's testimonies at work, and how they have spoken into the lives of other people, the transformations they have seen in other people, and people's own experiences of maybe coming to the Lord through a work colleague.

The preaching and teaching participants recalled as having the most significant impact on their daily lives were those who provided practical applications of the Bible to life events and experiences. Participants wanted to hear more about 'marketplace ministry' and speakers who came from various careers and work backgrounds. Sophia found a visiting speaker who had a medical background in Psychiatry, extremely helpful as he discussed the positive impact his faith had on his work, as well as the challenges he encountered. At that time, Sophia, a psychology student, felt she had witnessed a genuine example of how her future could unfold while still serving Christ.

The other gathered church activities referenced were home groups, which, as previously mentioned, would serve as places for peer-to-peer sharing and spaces to reflect on and share stories of real-life experiences as Christians while considering the Bible in relation to practical living. This reflects the 'holistic' small groups described in Schwarz's study (1996), which remains one of the most thorough studies involving 1,000 churches in 32 countries across five continents. Holistic small groups of this nature were found to be one of the eight universal church growth principles.

It was very important to participants that the gathered church recognised and encouraged a 24/7 faith that influenced all areas of life and that any sacred-secular divide was diminished. Ben recounted the first time he heard in church that the hours spent outside of church activities were also important to God. He talked about how he had accepted for years the teaching within the Independent Pentecostal church that one either worked in a secular field or was in ministry, which was considered sacred:

> And that's something that I think has needed to be taught consistently like it has because we can all nod our heads and go like Oh, yeah, but the fact that we've continued to have that, reminded of us and impressed on us, I think has been vital for really starting to just steer that ship, that I think to be honest, has been on the same course for a long time that you can either work for a living or you can be in ministry.

He then describes his father as a successful entrepreneur with flourishing businesses. His father felt called to the Pentecostal ministry and acted on what he had been taught: to give away his businesses, leaving everything behind. Ben concludes his story by saying:

> And I just think it's transformed thinking that we hear from Pastors (name) of actually there isn't a kind of polarity between business and ministry. …these can be parallels and it's a completely new paradigm, this last couple of years, and it has taken some time, even to sink into me to see what we do for the local authority as ministry opportunities every day which we do now, it really is a massive paradigm shift…

Participants viewed the activities of the gathered church as key opportunities to bridge the divide between the sacred and the secular, but, as Ben described, this represents a "massive paradigm shift" that will therefore require significant cultural and belief-system change. This appreciative inquiry study provides the beginning of the journey.

Alice described a church culture where every aspect of life is celebrated and valued making the point that "everything we do is appreciated because everyone has inherent worth". She made an interesting observation about culture:

> I think we don't realize what a lot of messages were given out by what we don't say, and what we reward. Because everybody thought it was wonderful when, I can think of three people, one who became the pastor he left his secular job to become the youth pastor and various other things. And then a couple went to Bible college or something like that. All of which I don't decry, I think it's great but I don't recall the celebrations, well, celebrations is perhaps extreme, but actually, what about cheering when somebody gets a job? To me, it's the unspoken message; it is so powerful because, actually, you can say what you like from the front but if your behaviour contradicts it, you're wasting your time. And nobody said anything, I must stress, nobody said anything at the front that was wrong at all but the message, powerful message that came across to me, which is why I was always asking God, what on earth my purpose was, was that your purpose had to be something that lined up with the fivefold ministry.

For me, as a pastor, this was a significant moment as I reflected on Alice's observations. As a leader, I am very familiar with the requirement to create a healthy culture within the church, but this reminds me that what I do or initiate speaks louder than anything I may say during the Sunday service (Kouzes & Posner, 2017).

While many discussions focused on internal church activities, this led to consideration of the church's outward-facing, missional aspects. The gathered church wanted to see a refocusing of our outward-facing community ministry. They suggested that this could be an extension of the church into the community by aligning some of the projects with the natural 'frontlines' of church members. For example, the workplaces of congregants or the neighbourhoods surrounding the home groups can be utilised to connect with and bless those outside the church. This has already begun during the study. For example, thank you hampers were

taken to a congregation member's school and GP practice at Christmas and blessing the staff in a local café with a thank you gift, where one of our small groups meets.

All of the areas discussed were subjects of deep passion and commitment. Participants enthusiastically spoke about Sundays and proposed some creative, life-giving ideas. Going forward, the Sunday service will reflect the collaboration of pastors, leaders, and congregants in preparing the scattered people of God for the week ahead. David's remarks encapsulate the vision for the future of the church:

> So yeah, I would say just that real teaching on aligning yourself with God and welcoming the Holy Spirit into your every day, and making it so that, you know, we talk about like on a Sunday having, having your cup filled so that it can be you can pour out into people throughout the week. So I think it is being in a church with teaching and worship that's conducive to keeping its congregation filled up in a sense, which I think that our church already does. But I would certainly say, imagine a future church in the future, you know, where these things would be a significant help, that would definitely be up there.

While David's statement moves somewhat towards shaping a desired future state, it still reflects the 'filling station' view that the Holy Spirit is only received during a church service not during our everyday experiences outside of church. This is an area that warrants further exploration in our discipleship discussions.

6.4 Development of Provocative Propositions

Returning to the Appreciating Theology model and the next stage of the AI process, we moved on to develop the 'Provocative Propositions' (PPs). These are imaginative statements about the future, crafted from the data and the imagination and visioning skills of those involved (Watkins, et al., 2011) as explained in Section 3.2. In this project, the LH crafted the PPs from the 16 themes, described as the positive core of the church, detailed at the beginning of this chapter.

6.4.1 Developing Provocative Propositions from the themes

From December 2023 to January 2024, the LH team crafted and refined the PP statements. This involved many discussions, re-visiting the original transcripts, and re-sharing stories and their context found within the data. I prepared a briefing handout on PPs to assist in the process, which we discussed and explored during a LH session. The LH members began this stage of the Appreciating Theology project with enthusiasm. It is a stage with tangible outputs that will be integral to the church's future. The LH members were keen to ensure the PPs were genuine and would resonate with the wider congregation, rather than strategic statements that would gather dust on a shelf within the church office. The group members were keen to develop these, but there were discussions about the terminology. The main concern was the unfamiliarity of

the term 'Provocative Propositions' and how congregation members may not understand it. The group members explored other possible terminologies, including vision statements, possibility or strategic statements, but for some members of the LH, these had too many connotations of business settings and vision statements displayed on a wall but having little meaning on a day-to-day basis. Our eventual title for the PP statements became ‘This is Us’ as it was felt that the PPs were saying precisely that. This is who we want to be, looking to our future as a congregation but stated affirmatively, in keeping with the ethos of AI. Some of the statements we are now, some we are moving towards and others we have yet to aspire to. For the congregation's younger members, the term ‘This is Us’ reflects the title of a top-rated US television drama from 2016 to 2022, following the lives of triplets and their parents. It was hoped that the title of the PPs would encourage ownership of the statements and reflect that we are achieving them together.

Rowett (2013, p. 77) offers a summary of the general guidelines for writing PPs :

- Provocative – do they stretch, challenge or interrupt?
- Positive – are they written in positive terms?
- Grounded – are there examples that demonstrate the proposition as a real possibility?
- Desired – if pursued, would the organisation and the people in it connect with the proposition – would they want it?
- Written in the current tense – is it written as if it is in place now?

This summary informed the LH's work in developing PPs from the data.

Most importantly, the PPs should “reflect the voices, ideas and dreams of those who were interviewed and engaged in the Appreciative Inquiry process” (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010, p. 213). This was a high priority in this study, and careful, repeated consideration was given to the story transcripts and the context of any comments highlighted.

To help develop the PPs, I led the LH through a straightforward example of creating a non-church-related PP. I also provided some examples of PPs from a different theological research study. To develop our PPs, the LH split into two groups; each group took a theme and discussed it. Exploring the words that developed the theme, the context within the stories told, and what people were saying. The LH members were then asked to identify a range of words that might represent each theme, refine those words, and consider any

images that came to mind for each theme. Some drew thought clouds, and others used small doodles to help their thinking. The groups then came together to share their thoughts and agreed on the final words used in the PPs. Seven PPs were crafted, which are listed in Figure 15 with words in 'italics' directly reflecting the themes identified from the storytelling data:

This is Us

1. We are a *community* of *Spirit-filled* believers who *encourage* one another to dedicate our *entire lives* to *serving* Christ, recognising that this *service* is *'ministry'*, regardless of where it takes place.
2. We represent Jesus in our area of service by *helping people, praying* for them and *sharing the light of the gospel* through both *words and actions*. We know we have an important Spirit-empowered role as co-workers with God to bring *transformation* to this world.
3. Congregation members have a *strong sense of purpose*, know their *God-given callings* in *all seasons of life*, and are *equipped* to fulfil them.
4. We believe that *all forms of work matter to God* and are part of his divine plan to redeem this world. We will be exemplary in *representing Jesus* in our *words*, *actions* and *behaviours* in our work environment.
5. We are a *welcoming* and *inclusive church*. We offer various opportunities for individuals *to connect* and *foster relationships*, sharing *wisdom* and *life experiences* that promote *growth* as *followers of Jesus* in our everyday lives.
6. Every member of the congregation will have the opportunity to *discover* and *receive affirmation of their skills*, allowing them to *flourish* in their life roles.
7. During our *Sunday service* as a united church, we engage in *practical, Bible-centred teaching, worship, Holy Spirit ministry, prayer,* and the *sharing of authentic life testimonies*. Congregants, pastors, and leaders *collaborate* to prepare the gathered people of God for the week to come. Our emphasis is *outward*, spreading *love* and *mercy* to *make a difference* in our world.

Figure 15: 'This is Us' statements

Having developed the 'This is Us' statements, the study progressed to the 'Let's Do' stage of the Appreciating Theology model, the destiny stage of the AI cycle, which is described in the next chapter of this thesis.

Chapter 7: Action and reflection

This chapter outlines the two subsequent steps of the Appreciating Theology model: the Let's Do and Let's Reflect stages. In the original AI process, Let's Do corresponds to the destiny stage, where actions to achieve the PPs are developed. This is also the time to recognise the emergent, unplanned changes that have occurred during the study. The reflections feed back into the Let's Learn stage of the model, particularly the themes identified from the stories. The iterative nature of AI enables revisiting the stages of the model and generating new learning and actions. AI does not possess an explicit reflective component because certain authors argue it is reflective throughout (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987; Stavros & Torres, 2018). Although I agree that AI is self-reflective, especially during the Let's Chat storytelling stage, after that, it becomes easy to complete the AI process with little time for reflection, despite AI being described as a "reflective search for the best in people, their organisations, and the world around them." (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987, p. 129). At each stage of the AI model, participants should engage in continuous dialogue, critically reflect on previous experiences, and collaboratively develop shared visions of the future. Stavros and Torres (2018) emphasise that reflection is not confined to the preliminary stages of AI, but is embedded within every conversation and decision. I have highlighted where reflection is explicitly incorporated within this Appreciating Theology model in the 'Let's Reflect' section of this chapter.

7.1 Let's Do stage of Appreciating Theology

This stage mirrors the 5D AI cycle destiny stage. The core task is to create actions that take us towards the new images of the future. Ideally, these actions should be cross-functional and cross-level to prevent siloed change and confusion during interactions among the church teams. An example of this would be an activity that includes the preaching team but omits the Kingdom Group leaders or members of the worship team. This systematic application of the AI approach fosters capacity within the church for ongoing positive change (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010). The starting point was the development and prioritisation of the actions designed to achieve the PPs.

7.1.1 Developing the action plan to achieve the PPs

The PPs were finalised in December 2023, and although there was a sense of elation and progress within the LH, the team was also aware that their task was not complete, as they needed to agree on an action plan to turn the PPs into reality. The action plan is a flexible, iterative document that requires regular review and refinement as changes occur within the church and in our external community.

The discussions with the LH members focused on the challenge of starting with a blank page versus agreeing on specific actions with outcome measures. As the conversations developed, it was agreed that to meet the expectations of the Board of Trustees and the study participants, we needed to develop an initial action plan. We did not set any outcome measures, as we felt they should emerge from engagement with members of the congregation as the initial actions were undertaken. LH members brainstormed actions for each PP, identified quick wins to demonstrate progress, and considered how to build on existing activities. We recognised that change does not always mean starting afresh; it can be beneficial to integrate with current activities. Some things may need to stop, and new initiatives may begin. AI is a vehicle for focusing on the "generative and life-giving forces" (Watkins, et al., 2011, p. 22) that make the organisation the best it can be. As we developed the action plan, we endeavoured to keep this at the centre of our thinking and resist the temptation to fall back on a diagnostic approach. For example, we concentrated on creating more opportunities for dialogue to achieve the actions, focusing on hearts and minds rather than simply telling people what to do and expecting their behaviours to change accordingly. (Watkins, et al., 2011). This approach aligns with what Bushe & Marshak (2015) described as a dialogical model for bringing change rather than a diagnostic approach. My reflexive journey has led me to realise that my view of the church is not of an abstract organisation composed of impersonal entities, independent individuals, and leaders who operate through control and apply a set of standard techniques that result in 'success'. The church is a place where conversations influence outcomes, and we are interdependent with one another. Congregants make choices; situations are complex and sometimes uncertain, making 'success' congregation-specific, emerging from all the complexities of church life (Bushe, 2015). A rigid diagnostic approach was not my goal in this work, and I had to make a conscious effort not to fall back on my years of experience in the National Health Service (NHS) and Local Authority, where I developed and delivered diagnostic action plans.

Reflecting on my journal entries, I realise how challenging the next steps of this study were. I struggled to balance the eager efforts of the LH members to progress with a plan and achieve results, the expectations of the study participants to see tangible outcomes, with the generativity of AI to think and act differently. My background in diagnostic action planning made this particularly difficult. This stage encouraged a dialogical approach, fostering transformational change in the church by promoting a more emergent, self-organising strategy for the action plan. This seemed risky, as it might cause disruption and a degree of chaos, but it could also lead to some highly innovative outcomes. I had noted this quote in my reflective journal: "Dialogic Organisational Development sees disruption not as failure, but as an essential opportunity for new ideas to emerge" (Bushe, 2015, p. 4). My aversion to disruption and natural preference for order and structure presented a challenge but also offered an opportunity to focus on being a leader who creates space for things to emerge rather than simply directing and shaping the future vision. I was also unsure

whether we had the flexibility within our IP church structures to support and encourage self-organising initiatives. How would the Trustees respond to allocating funds to ideas that were ‘experimental’, and how would our leadership team enable members to be self-directed?

The LH were keen to draw on the discussions within the transcripts. The LICC work ‘Fruitfulness on the Frontline’ (The London Institute for Contemporary Christianity, 2014) was mentioned in some transcripts, which led to a discussion about ‘fruitfulness’, and this became a key action. The LH spent one of the sessions exploring vocation in terms of serving others, contributing to the common good, and living out our values. This led to a discussion on vocational stewardship. (Stevens, 2000; Sherman, 2011; Keller, 2012) described in Chapter 2, pg. 13, and how our work shapes our Christian learning as part of our discipleship journey. Vocational stewardship became one of the key actions in the plan to achieve the PPs. Linked to this was a discussion from the transcripts on leadership in the workplace and how to steward it well, which was again recognised as a key action.

Over 40 actions were initially identified but later reduced to 32. While all actions were initially recorded, it was recognised that, as some are completed, the remaining actions would need review to determine whether they are still necessary or should be revised based on new information generated during the iterative AI process. To rank the actions, each LH member was allocated 10 dots to vote on the 10 actions they believed best reflected the congregation's priorities and would guide us towards the desired future. The focus on maximising relevant current church activities as delivery channels was also considered. After several discussions among the LH members, 10 actions were agreed upon, and these became the 2024 - 2026[7] Action Plan. We made sure to emphasise that these were a starting point; the actions were flexible, could be adjusted, and did not encompass all the emergent activities in the congregation's lives that would also help achieve the PPs.

The action plan is outlined in Table 5. While the plan incorporates several church activities, many are already in place and only need to be aligned with the outcomes of this study. Examples include the Kingdom Heart Community Ministry, Durham University Growing Leaders Programme, and the ‘This Time Tomorrow’ segments in the Sunday service.

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[7] The timescales in the study were extended due to a nine-month recovery period for the researcher following an illness.

Table 5: 'This is Us' Action Plan 2024-2026

'This Is Us' – Action Plan 2024 -2026

Priority	Action	'This is Us' statement(s)
1	Sharing in workshop-style events on fruitfulness and what it looks like in our everyday lives. To include spiritual practices for fruitfulness. Focus on practical application and peer sharing. Arrange a follow-up session for individuals to give feedback on their experiences	1, 2, 4, 5
2	Teaching on 'what is ministry' in the Sunday service. Include opportunities for congregational members to share their faith learning, wisdom and experience	1, 7
3	Sunday preaching on work and its relevance to the Kingdom of God. Regularly include a 'This Time Tomorrow' opportunity for a congregational member to share their stories	4, 7
4	Peers teaching and facilitating discussions on vocational stewardship and vocational discipleship within Kingdom Groups. Establish a group to develop creative materials to help those delivering the teaching and discussions	2, 4, 5
5.	Guest speakers – workshops, evening dinners, breakfast clubs & Sundays to cover topics relevant to the 'This is Us' statements	1, 2, 3, 4
6	Discuss case studies and real-life challenges for Christians in ethical decision-making in all spheres of our lives	2, 3, 4
7	Workshop discussions on 'Stewardship of Vocational Power'— leadership in the workplace. Focus on practical application, and group members decide on topics	3, 4, 6
8	Creating a space for dedicated prayer and storytelling from the congregation in a Sunday service and in Kingdom Groups, modelling that the whole of life is ministry	1, 4, 6, 7
9	Collect ideas from the congregation for outward-facing projects as part of our Kingdom Heart Community Ministry and give people an opportunity to coordinate and participate in the activities. Look for opportunities to link projects to workplaces and other places where congregants spend their time	2, 6, 7
10	Continue to sponsor people to attend the Cranmer Hall, Durham University, Growing Leaders Programme, where congregational members can explore their skills, purpose and leadership in all spheres of life. Current attendees can become mentors for future attendees	3, 5, 6

This stage took much longer than I anticipated, but giving the team time to explore and reflect on their responses to the PPs was a valuable use of time. We consistently referred to the transcripts and to those we were entrusted to represent in this study. We were not acting as management consultants, observing as experts and deciding what was needed to fix the church, but rather fellow congregants who, along with our peer participants, had experience and wisdom to create change where change was necessary. Watkins et al. (2011) describes two valuable gifts that AI brings to an organisation: "a practical change process and a new paradigm view of how we shape our future" (p. 36). They suggest that the combination of these two gifts prevents AI from reverting to a deficit approach. Within this project, my observations concur with those of Burke (2017) and Kotter (1996), that the paradigm shift demands ongoing attention and is a lengthy process. One project alone will not accomplish this; it is part of the journey, a journey that resembles building the bridge while walking on it.

7.2 Emergent changes

It has been essential to remember that AI is not a linear process. While the emergent changes are reported here, they occurred elsewhere in the process and will continue to emerge moving forward (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010). The 'Simultaneity principle' of AI proposes that inquiry is intervention and that "once we start to ask a question we create change" (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010, p. 52). In this study, one of the early changes occurred during the initial discussions in the LH about the study and the questions we sought to answer. It became clear that our espoused and operant theologies did not align. We stated that we supported all aspects of life as ministry 24/7, yet our church website visually only celebrated platform ministry and Sunday church activities. With the assistance of our media team and congregation members, we updated some of the photographs on the church website to feature congregants at work, in the office, a nurse on her break, grandparents in the park with their grandchildren and retirees with a passion for the environment working in their garden. This was a small start in reflecting our espoused theology on our church website and social media.

Later in the study, while identifying themes, it became clear how valuable congregants found the 'This Time Tomorrow' sessions that had taken place during the Sunday services but were now relegated to maybe once every three months. This was easily remedied by including it regularly each month, or even more frequently, once more work stories had been collated.

The style and approach of the preaching team also changed, with peer collaboration increasing, the use of real-life examples from the congregation, and a greater emphasis on everyday living as Christians and

the workplace as a place of ministry within the Sunday teaching. Some members of the LH were also members of the preaching team, which may have influenced this change.

7.3 Taking the Let's Do work forward

The 2024/26 action plan required the development of supporting actions, along with the identification of resources and timescales, which have been approved by the Board of Trustees and our Leadership Team. Several original LH members have expressed a desire to continue their involvement in this study. I have four LH members who wish to reassemble into the Discovery Team (DT) to progress this work. I am actively inviting new church members interested in this work to join the team, aiming to enhance diversity as the church now benefits from a richer cultural background. The DT members will focus on a personal interest area within the action plan and collaborate with congregational members to turn the related actions for the PPs into meaningful activities. Their main role will be to identify what members of the congregation are already doing or want to do in a way that aligns with the chosen PP. They can then work with congregation members as a self-organising and self-authorised group to 'experiment' with actions and activities. There will also be opportunities for interested congregants to join the DT either on a permanent basis or as time-limited co-opted members. The time-limited co-opted members will participate in specific aspects of the plans, such as youth leaders or individuals with roles in life that bring expertise and experience in particular areas, e.g., foster carers, self-employed individuals, or students. This empowered self-organising approach embodies the spirit of AI. Using a dialogical approach to change can avoid the traditional top-down, individual-led action planning often seen in change projects (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010; Bushe & Marshak, 2015). This approach also recognises that most things require a balance of planning and opportunism to be achieved (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010).

The full implementation of the action plan extends beyond the timescale of this thesis. Informal congregant feedback has been positive. Formal briefing sessions for the church took place in September 2025, and a Trustee briefing was held in October 2025. The current communication plan is displayed in Table 6.

Table 6: Communication Plan: September 2025 – September 2026

Date	Action	By Whom	Recipients
Sept 2025	Presentation 1 & email follow-up. Reminder of study, why, research questions and five key areas identified in the study. Member of LH to share their experience	Researcher & member of LH	Congregation

	during the study. Further recruitment to DT. Use social media to reinforce key messages		
September 2025	Presentation 2. Share PPs, how they influence the vision and direction of the church. Describe how the action plan was created and how input can be provided by DT members	Researcher and member of DT. Possibly a Trustee member of DT	Congregation
Ongoing Sept 2025	Revisit PPs throughout September by presenting to the congregation. Provide printed copies. Release and empower DT members to work with congregants, seeking out current actions or future experimental ideas that help achieve the PPs. Start conversations in KGs	Researcher and members of DT Engage the media and graphic design team	Congregation
October 2025	Progress report to Trustees	Researcher	Board of Trustees
December 2025	Update to the Congregation on actions to date and opportunities for feedback	Researcher, DT member(s) and innovators from the congregation	Congregation
Jan 2026 – Sept 2026	Continue updates and collect reflections on progress using the AI approach	Researcher and DT members	Congregation and Board of Trustees

Whilst this is the very early days of this Let's Do stage, it does feel as if we are on a pathway of continuous dialogue and learning (Watkins, et al., 2011). I close this section with an entry from my reflective journal dated 8 April 2024:

> We have now reached a pivotal point in the study where it would be easy to think 'job done' when in fact it is only the beginning. As a leader, I need to consider how we can avoid this from becoming a rigid strategic plan, which could be heavily influenced by my years of experience in the NHS, where action plans are often fixed and rigidly applied. Introducing innovative experimentation will be a challenge for many of us, not least me, but it could be a way of taking a more flexible and responsive approach moving forward. This feels incredibly risky. Letting go of control as a Pentecostal leader is not something I have often seen role-modelled, in fact, not at all. This could mark the beginning of a significantly different leadership model within our church.

7.4 Let's Reflect stage of the Appreciating Theology model

I added this stage to the original AI process to provide a range of reflective opportunities within the Appreciating Theology model (see Chapter 4, sections 4.4 & 4.5). I will describe the activity, where it took place in the model and, where appropriate, a summary of the reflections.

7.4.1 Theological reflection

This occurred during the data analysis activities of the study, within the Let's Learn stage of the Appreciating Theology model. It provided a theological emphasis within the organisational change model of AI by using the TAR reflective template and the 'four voices of theology' approach, which are described in Chapter 4. This kept the study grounded within practical theology rather than purely an organisational change theory.

As Cameron et al. (2010, p. 15) indicate "theology cannot appear after the data has been collected as if it were simply 'the icing on the cake already baked in the oven of social analysis". To address this within the study, I included a customised version of the template developed by the TAR team to facilitate theological reflection on each transcript, as well as a separate reflective exercise using the four voices approach, described later in this section.

The practices shared during the Let's Chat storytelling sessions possess theological significance, which we sought to identify using a simple reflective document based on the TAR template, a 'Guide to reading data' (Cameron, et al., 2010) asking the following questions:

Q1. The Let's Chat questions were developed to help participants share their stories about their purpose, faith, and work. How does the information collected in the transcript help answer the questions and tell the participant's story?
Q2. Is there anything that surprises/strikes you about the information?
Q3. What kind of beliefs and values are embodied in the stories?
Q4. Is there anything that seems to affirm our church's beliefs and values?
Q5. Is there anything that seems to challenge our church's beliefs and values?
Q6. Where do you see God in the responses?
Q7. What learning might you be keen to draw from this material for people involved in our church?
Q8. Based on the answer to Q7. What actions would you be keen to take forward?

Cameron reminds us that all practices come from somewhere, and TAR "locates itself within a dynamic of distinct but interrelated and overlapping 'voices' " (2010, p. 53). This is described by Cameron et al. (2010) as 'theology in four voices', providing a heuristic and hermeneutical framework within the TAR methodology. Whilst four voices are described, the process is complex, with voices overlapping and any of the voices speaking simultaneously. This complexity is described by a member of the original ARCS team, reminding us that "as 'faith seeking understanding', theology only properly exists in the conversation between

the voices" (Watkins, 2020, p. 46). The researcher's skill is then to identify insights in the voice conversations and assist participants in recognising learning points to help us understand practice from these conversations. The four voices are described as operant, reflecting the theology embedded in the practices of a group, espoused by the theology drawn from the group's own articulation of its beliefs, the normative voice from sources the group regards as authoritative, and the formal voice, which is the theology of the academy (Cameron, et al., 2010, pp. 53-56).

After a brief introduction and sharing examples of the four voices approach, each LH member completed a four voices template for each of their transcripts. At the next LH gathering, the findings of the TAR exercise and the theological voices were discussed. This was, for most of us, our first exposure to the four voices, but members found the process simple to apply and it prompted some interesting reflections. The concept of listening to the voices being spoken amidst storytelling was helpful. When people are asked about a belief directly, they can tend to give an expected or inherited answer from their leaders. The storytelling of AI provided a less direct answer, but it offered a greater chance of hearing what people truly think and do.

This activity facilitated theological discussions within the LH and helped us view the 'data' through a theological lens, with the reflective activities acting as 'scaffolding'. This provided theological support and structure to the discussions and learning within the Appreciating Theology model, without detracting from the focus on the data. Although we discussed the term scaffolding in the literal sense, it is a term used in education, where a more expert individual assists a learner by performing part of the task, moving the learner towards greater independence and ownership of their learning (Mascolo, 2005). The idea is of a learner achieving a higher level of skill than they could ordinarily achieve while acting alone. This captured the essence of the exercises' usefulness to LH members, as it provided a supporting framework for reflecting on the data.

The four voices were explained to the LH as a means to achieve the end, and our end at this stage of the study was theological discovery (Dunlop, 2021). The four voices were not an end in themselves, which can be easily lost in the detail of the process, and this is where the scaffolding analogy was helpful. Following the approach of Watkins (2020), a member of the original ARCS[8] team, we focused on the findings or 'disclosures' that were discerned during the research rather than naming the voices explicitly. The TAR intervention, including the use of the four voices, was not initiated in this study until the LH members had

[8] ARCS - Action Research Church and Society Team (Cameron, et al., 2010). See Chapter 4 for more details.

spent almost eight months analysing and identifying themes from their transcripts. This was done to avoid over-reliance on structuring the findings around the four voice headings, which would imply, to some degree, that the voices are discrete rather than interrelated and form part of an inclusive conversation. This allowed us to focus on the body of data from the Let's Chat discussions rather than the scaffolding provided by the TAR approach.

7.4.1.1 Outcomes from the theological reflective exercise

The findings from the reflective template based on the TAR 'Guide to Reading the Data' and the four voices discussions were varied and, at times, difficult to summarise. Pentecostal practice is characterised by its unexpected nature, an awareness of the supernatural and spontaneity. However, for Christians to live transformed lives, we must recognise how the Spirit is also present in the ordinary aspects of life and work, as these encompass a much larger part of our daily living and our faith learning (Butler, 2020). The use of theological reflection in this AI study was complementary, as it assisted in the "disclosure of theology through a conversational method" (Cameron, et al., 2010, p. 56), seeking to achieve "formative transformation of practice" (p. 58) and allow "practice to contribute to the transformation of theology" (p. 59), all of which align well with the approach of AI.

In terms of the actual outcomes of the reflective exercises, it confirmed many of the themes already identified by the LH members. The principles of servanthood, doing good, helping people and sharing faith were prevalent in the TAR reflections. This exercise provided us with an opportunity to examine the theological influences reflected in the attitudes and beliefs expressed in the transcripts.

a) The Word of God

We examined the surprisingly few references to the Word of God regarding work mentioned in the transcripts, other than a single reference to God blessing the work of our hands (Deuteronomy 2:7, 28:12, Psalm 90:17). The group acknowledged the scriptures as the normative authority in Pentecostal theology, but their practical application across all areas of life was unclear. This raises the question of how the church helps people apply the Word of God to their everyday lives. An interesting reflection was how, for some second- and third-generation Pentecostals, the opinions of family members from previous generations were given almost a 'normative' status in relation to their faith and beliefs, similar to that of the Word of God.

b) Pneumatology

There were also, for a Pentecostal church, few references to the Holy Spirit being actively involved in our day-to-day activities within the transcripts. These discussions did not reflect on the participants but highlighted some aspects of our theology. Our limited pneumatology leaves individuals struggling to see how the Holy Spirit could possibly help them and operate in their lives outside of church. Holy Spirit activity was often confined to specific tasks and places, such as spirit-filled worship or operating in the gifts of the Spirit in a service, rather than in our daily secular activities outside of church. It is by living out our daily lives that we grow spiritually. Butler (2023b) highlighted the importance of the Holy Spirit in personal spiritual growth during his work with Methodist congregations and in the Church of England paper to the General Synod 'Developing Disciples' (2015), indicating that Pentecostals are not alone in this endeavour.

c) Pentecostal ecclesiology

Pentecostal ecclesiology was discussed, and it was noted that the espoused theology prioritised concern for the world; however, the operant voice focused on the gathered church rather than the scattered church, resulting in relegation of Monday to Saturday activities in the lives of congregants (Raynor, 2024; Nelson, 2025). During this discussion, we noted how little of what we did as a gathered church—such as preaching, teaching, and courses—supported congregants' daily lives. While this might seem like a negative conclusion, we also recognised the positive principle of AI at work through these reflective exercises. LH members identified what participants found helpful, especially their 'dream' responses for the future church, which are outlined in Chapter 6. For instance, some expressed a desire for regular real-life testimonies in the Sunday service. Some espoused theologies suggested that the Sunday service is a 'petrol station' where we are filled up to be drained in the secular world during the week. Others indicated that the Spirit can be experienced in their daily work. I suggest there will always be an element of 'filling up' on a Sunday within our tradition, due to the nature of worship and the style of service; however, it is crucial that this does not portray the week ahead as a spiritual desert.

d) Soteriology

The espoused and operant voices expressed within the transcripts primarily focused on individual conversions rather than the broader concepts of whole-life discipleship and the *Missio Dei*. In common with other studies (Dover, 2011; Raynor, 2024), participants saw one of their main purposes for being in a secular role as having the opportunity to share their faith, rather than the secular role having any other God-given purpose. Kingdom work was very much about conversion work rather than secular work having any impact on

the Kingdom. This confirmed our initial perceptions and has directed our future work. A better understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit and the Kingdom of God could lead to a wider understanding of missiology and its connection to our everyday lives (Lord, 2002).

e) Eschatology

There was one reference in the transcripts to having a purpose on earth, not just passing through to get to heaven. No other mentions of our hope or understanding of the future were directly expressed. The reflective discussions in the LH included a brief exploration of our eschatological beliefs and how these can impact our view of work. If we believe that this world will be destroyed completely and a new heaven and earth established, then what motivates us to focus on God's activity in our workplaces, unless it is to share the message of salvation? The prevalent dispensational millennialism view in IP churches was discussed, and how this has left a sacred-secular divide legacy within the church (Dover, 2011). We concluded that this area of our Pentecostal theology needed more exploration within the life of the church if we were to achieve a change in attitudes towards secular work.

f) Summary

This is a summary of the numerous discussions held within the LH during this reflection period. These discussions have informed the study actions outlined in Chapters 6 and 7. Drawing on my reflective diary entries, I conclude that these exercises were helpful and achieved my intended goals. They provided a way to ground the study in theology without detracting from the data and the AI methodology. Therefore, the scaffolding analogy proved useful. As a newcomer to these reflective approaches, the study might have benefited from involving an external expert theologian group, despite being aware of the congregation's views against feeling externally scrutinised. I chose greater congregational inclusion over involving an external group and believe the wider congregation has become more receptive to change due to the number of participants involved in this study. I have also considered how easily a perceived powerful voice, such as the normative and formal voices, can suppress the espoused and operant voices. People tend to be silenced if those formal voices start speaking loudly, which was something I wanted to avoid. Packiam (2018, p. 44) makes an interesting statement in his thesis exploring hope in contemporary worship songs and services, “I am allowing the normative and formal voice to *interrogate* the espoused and operant voices” (italics mine). This was the perception I wanted to avoid, as it would have discouraged the inclusion of my participants; I sought to give all four voices equal weight and space.

My aim was not to provide academic knowledge about the use of TAR or the four voices of theology. I recognise that we could have benefited more from these reflective exercises if I had been more experienced. I have learned a great deal from this initial experience and am eager to deepen my understanding of how it might be applied in the future. Regardless of the chosen reflection model, I believe some form of theological reflection should be incorporated when using AI in a church setting.

7.4.2 Researcher reflections

Throughout this study, I kept a reflective journal to support my reflexive journey, documenting my evolving thoughts, self-awareness, and positionality both as the Senior Pastor and an insider researcher. This has included reflections on the planning and progression of the study, as well as on the Appreciating Theology model and the AI process underpinning it. I have reflected on my own practice and attempted to be reflexive throughout my involvement in the study. In my reflections, I considered my feelings, experiences, and incidents to make meaning and reflect on their implications for my future actions (Dahmen-Adkins & Peterson, 2025). Such an approach is widely accepted in qualitative research, and as described by Ortlipp (2008) makes visible how the research outcomes have been constructed. This construction "originates in the various choices and decisions researchers undertake during the process of researching" (Mruck & Breuer, 2003) all of which are influenced by my personal assumptions, belief systems and subjectivities. An important area of reflection has been as an insider researcher. I have two roles running concurrently: senior pastor and researcher. The challenges include being aware of how my roles influence my perception of the world, how others see me, and when to switch between one role and another (Coghlan, 2019). I have found that maintaining a reflective journal has been very helpful in considering this duality of roles. I have included any significant reflections on this within the relevant chapters of this thesis.

Reflecting on my practice as a pastor has been valuable. I have recognised areas where I needed to change, especially in how I perceive success in my role. My success is not about being the 'one' with all the answers. Instead, my role is to facilitate the gathering of congregation members in spaces where they can share their understanding of their everyday faith with one another. This more facilitative leadership, in my Pentecostal context, is unusual and might be seen as a surrender of traditional leadership authority associated with the role of a pastor. Being reflective is an important part of my practice as a qualitative researcher; it contributes to the trustworthiness of the research findings as well as the ethical scrutiny required (Arnold, et al., 2022). I have sought to maintain a reflective stance throughout the study and beyond in my practice as a pastor, particularly in the area of practical theology and in my professional practice as a Registered Nurse, (Schön, 2016), all of which have contributed to who I am as a researching practitioner.

Throughout my professional career, church experiences, and personal life, I have sought to be reflective as a way of living, rather than something I do only in specific situations or as part of an academic study (Bolton & Delderfield 2018). Reflection sheds light on who I am, how I relate to others and how I practice in the many roles I hold in life. It also acts as a place where I can ask searching questions and explore complex and sometimes difficult situations (Bolton, et al., 2003). Throughout this study's timeline, the most challenging period was in 2022, following the consecutive deaths of three young men over a short period, who were known to the congregation and had family members and close friends within the church. As a response, we halted all our planned preaching and teaching and focused on addressing the numerous questions people had about their faith, particularly in a Pentecostal setting where healing and faith are prominent doctrines. The support of family and close friends took priority, and everything else, including this study, felt of little importance. The LH decided to continue meeting during this season, gaining support from one another and discussing the future, which gave them hope for better days. My reflective journal entries focused more on their inner strength and strong relationships than on the research study. We emerged from that season stronger and more determined to make a difference in the world around us, which served as a catalyst for advancing the work of this study. It is important to recognise that research occurs in the real world (Robson, 2002), and while there are many critics of AI due to its focus on positivity, my reflective accounts highlight the value of hope derived from exploring the positive, life-giving aspects of the church, even in the midst of such challenging times.

Reflective practices such as those described above form part of the journey towards reflexivity, which is described by Tracy (2010) as part of the sincerity criteria for excellent qualitative research, sincerity, in this context, refers to authenticity and genuineness. Reflexivity enables honesty and transparency regarding the research method and the researcher's biases, goals, and vulnerabilities.

7.4.3 LH members' reflections

Drawing on the work of Dahmen & Peterson (2025), I wanted to create an opportunity for participants in the LH to reflect on the process of AI, with the goal of gaining a deeper and more comprehensive understanding. This approach recognises the dual role of LH members as both essential members of the congregation and as agents of change. The insights gained from these reflections could lead to revisions of our plans within the church, both for this AI study and for its future application (Reason & Bradbury, 2013).

The LH members were given a reflective template with 10 questions, as shown in Figure 16, at the end of the Let's Do stage of the Appreciating Theology process. These initial reflections begin with some

fundamental questions about the AI process and whether, according to the LH members, it has achieved its objectives. They also include their personal thoughts on the future use of AI within the church and their enthusiasm for taking part in any upcoming AI projects. Whilst this was described as a reflective exercise, it is also the very early stages of a reflective valuation that I intend to develop further in the future. Reflective valuation in AI focuses on the strengths, successes and learning rather than the gaps and inefficiencies of many evaluation models (Preskill & Coughlan, 2003; 2006). The future valuation of this AI project will focus more on the value of the actions and whether the outcomes were effective, rather than on whether we achieved the desired actions.

Reflective Valuation

1. Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is an approach that encourages people to share their positive experiences about faith and work.
Do you think this was achieved? Please circle **YES** **NO**
Any comments/reflections on your answer?

2. AI encourages people to dream about their future and, in this study, the future of the church.
Do you think this was achieved? Please circle **YES** **NO**
Any comments/reflections on your answer?

3. In this study, AI was used to obtain congregational members' perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes towards secular work.
Do you think this was achieved? Please circle **YES** **NO**
Any comments/reflections on your answer?

4. AI uses a collaborative approach throughout.
Do you think this was achieved? Please circle **YES** **NO**
Any comments/reflections on your answer?

5. The AI process develops positive themes from the stories shared with us by members of the congregation. Do you think the final themes we agreed on reflect the people's stories?

Please circle **YES** **NO**

Any comments/reflections on your answer?

6. Once the themes were identified, they informed the development of mini-vision statements written in the present tense and affirmative, called Provocative Propositions (PPs).
Do you think the PPs we developed capture the themes? Please circle **YES** **NO**
Any comments/reflections on your answer?

7. The Learning Hub developed an action plan to achieve the Provocative Propositions.
Do you think the action plan is useful? Please circle **YES** **NO**
Do you think the action plan is achievable? Please circle **YES** **NO**
Any comments/reflections on your answer?

8. Did completing the TAR template and four voices exercise help focus on the theology within the stories?

Please circle **YES** **NO**
Any comments/reflections on your answer?

9. The AI approach can be applied to explore other areas of church life.
Do you think it would be useful to use to explore other areas of church life?
Please circle **YES** **NO**
Any comments/reflections on your answer? You may like to include suggestions for future areas of church life or the Christian faith that could be explored in this way.

10. Would you volunteer to participate in future AI projects in the church?
Please circle **YES** **NO**

Any comments/reflections on your answer?

Figure 16: LH members' reflective valuation proforma

The reflective exercise with the LH members confirmed that the LH members worked very well together and described their involvement in the project using terminology such as ‘a joy’ and ‘enjoyable’. All team members felt the project was collaborative, and all views, even those that differed, were given space and were respected. There were also comments about the advantages of hearing the views of other LH members, noting that this peer-to-peer approach was very valuable, a finding similar to that from the Let’s Chat stage of the study. The members recognised that, for several participants, this was possibly the first time they had been asked to discuss their work and faith. Some initially struggled, but the storytelling approach encouraged them to reflect and articulate their views. One learning hub member described it as ‘eye-opening’ for themselves and the people telling their stories, that faith and work could possibly be connected. The LH members were open about the challenges in the process, especially in creating a smaller number of merged themes, but felt that the collaborative efforts had succeeded in doing so. Some LH members mentioned the initial difficulty in imagining the church of the future, noting that congregants might never have been asked to help shape their church's future before. Most of the LH recognised this was just the beginning of the journey and that much more work would be required, but they and the congregants looked forward to seeing the outcomes start to emerge in the church.

The LH members all felt the PPs reflected the themes of the stories and that the action plan was realistic and achievable. Several thought the emergent actions were valuable and had helped the congregation see the progress and the benefits of the study at an early stage. All members of the LH were able to suggest areas for future use of AI, including family life, sharing one's faith, youth and children's ministries, opportunities for those with disabilities, and the value of older people in the church. All LH members found the TAR and four voices exercises of value, providing 'structure', or as we called it, 'scaffolding' to reflect theologically on the stories. Some provided examples of how they had returned to their transcripts and, on re-reading them, could now hear the espoused theology in the comments and operant voice in the actions. Several LH members are interested in being involved in the future work of this study and any other AI projects within the church. One described it as an "amazing tool", another as a "significant growth experience", and others found it "thoroughly enjoyable". Based on this initial reflective exercise, I am very optimistic about the future use of AI among members of this group and the wider congregation.

7.4.4 Congregational reflections

Based on the project's timescales, the congregational reflections will begin to be collated in February 2026, which falls outside the scope of this thesis. The LH felt we needed to have made progress on the actions and started the DT work before the reflections were collated. The reflective exercise with the congregants will be conducted in the 'spirit of AI', with members of the DT engaging in informal conversations with members of the congregation in small groups or through a planned Kingdom Group meeting over a four-week period. The DT will adopt a storytelling approach throughout this exercise. The agreed-upon questions to date are:

1. Can you tell me if there is anything in this church that shows that what you do outside of church activities is important to God?
2. Can you think of an example of something done in this church that has helped you in your life outside of Sundays?
3. How do you feel about being part of a church that emphasises living as a disciple of Jesus in all areas of life?

The questions are clearly designed to align with our use of AI and to identify any progress in shifting the culture towards whole-life discipleship and achieving the 'This is Us' statements. It is expected that repeated cycles of reflection will take place with the congregation to inform the project's progress and refine the action plan.

7.5 Conclusion

This chapter has described the progress with the Let's Do and Let's Reflect stages of the Appreciating Theology model to date. Work continues not only on the actions but also on the supporting infrastructures and resources to achieve the 'This is Us' statements. The purposefully added iterative reflective stage of the Appreciating Theology model will continue throughout 2025-2026 and beyond, involving the wider congregation. It will form part of the legacy of the study that continues after completion of this thesis. These stages of the model offered insightful reflections on areas such as a potentially limited pneumatology, a church-focused approach to Pentecostal theology, and a future-oriented eschatology that sees the destruction of this world as the end, rather than a restoration of all things. These reflections have shaped the discussion in Chapter 8.

Chapter 8: Discussion and conclusion

In this chapter, I will discuss how the study has contributed to answering the three research questions detailed in Chapter 1, section 1.4.

8.1 Why I chose AI as my methodology in this IP church

For reasons outlined earlier in Chapter 4, Section 4.4, TAR seemed unsuitable for initiating change with this particular group. Furthermore, I had previously encountered the challenges of employing a problem-based action research approach in my secular work on change projects. It can be challenging to move away from discussing the problem, leading to a downward spiral that is difficult to escape. I noticed many action research projects aim to change people's behaviour without first engaging their hearts and minds. Most of my experience is within large NHS or social care organisations, where staff and leaders participate in action research to improve care, save costs, or boost productivity. This research, however, is happening in a church, where people attend voluntarily; engagement of both heart and mind is crucial, as well as their spiritual growth and wellbeing.

I chose to utilise the AI 5D cycle to inform the Appreciating Theology model. AI is described as a flexible process based on core principles, including appreciation, applicability, provocation, and collaboration. This flexibility enables experimentation with how the AI process is implemented. This study was beneficial, as it offered options for taking actions, engaging participants, and trying different approaches if initial efforts were unsuccessful.

8.2 Can an Appreciative Inquiry approach change attitudes towards, and perceptions of, secular work in a UK Independent Pentecostal church community? (RQ 1.0)

I would propose that AI can change attitudes, as evidenced across several areas. It creates a vision for the future, alters attitudes and perceptions of work, calling, the sacred-secular divide, discipleship and the gathered church. These will now be explored.

8.2.1 AI creates a vision for the future

AI is viewed more as a philosophy than a research method (Duncan & Ridley-Duff, 2014). As a philosophy, it represents a way of perceiving the world, a stance you adopt, and it can inspire a compelling vision for the future. The images of the church's future vision originated from the congregation's stories of their life-affirming experiences of work and faith, which were then shaped into the ‘This is Us’ statements.

These statements are grounded in positive affirmation, highlighting strengths and possibilities that embody our vision for the future.

Unlike other forms of action research, AI specifically generates imaginings—grounded yet aspirational—of potential futures. AI helps inspire individuals about their agency in the present, empowering them to co-create the future. In practice, this was evident during storytelling sessions, where congregants gained confidence in their ability to act and therefore in their participation in shaping the church's future. In a Pentecostal context, there is often a tendency for the congregation's agency to be diminished, possibly due to hierarchical leadership or a lack of environments that enable exercising agency. This contrasts with other aspects of Pentecostalism, namely that individuals have free will and personal experiences of the Spirit speaking and guiding their actions. In Pentecostalism, agency often manifests as empowerment to act through the presence and gifts of the Holy Spirit, such as prophecy, healing, and speaking in tongues. This empowerment of human agency through supernatural means is central to our theology and practice, but it rarely extends to the creation of visions or future actions for the church. AI offers participants a space to act with confidence and control over their future practices and, in this study, to help shape the future of the church.

8.2.2 AI brings change

AI offers a favourable approach to change in the church, but it could be argued that any form of organisational development (OD) actions can bring about change. In my experience, OD activities usually start with an exemplar model and then compare the current team, organisation or leaders to that model. It is primarily concerned with what people do, such as how they communicate, resolve conflicts, and problem-solve. OD draws on existing validated knowledge and brings it into the organisation. This form of OD follows a diagnostic approach influenced by positivism and classical science (Bushe & Marshak, 2015).

AI is recognised as a form of dialogic OD, which is influenced by interpretive and social constructionist perspectives, which align with the fundamentals of AI (Bushe & Marshak, 2015). Dialogical OD is driven by energetic interactions to achieve change through discourse, seeking to change hearts and minds (Davis, 2018). AI generates new knowledge and develops internal models and theories. This 'homegrown' approach had the benefit of being customised specifically for our church, its congregants, and the community we serve. It has made the findings and related plans much more acceptable, rather than adopting ideas from elsewhere that do not quite suit our context. As an IP church, we do not have a central headquarters where plans and ideas for activities, such as missions or discipleship, are shared for implementation. Instead, we tend to look for ideas at network gatherings and in popular books or podcasts.

While these have their place, there is a risk in adopting ideas from elsewhere; the church's identity can be lost, and its understanding of its specific role in establishing the Kingdom of God can become clouded. External resources help supplement the church's activities, but the church's vision must originate from within if ownership by the congregation is to be achieved.

AI is also distinct from OD practices in that it yields a generative metaphor, defined as a concise phrase that is provocative and creates new opportunities for action, conducive to bringing about generative change (Bushe & Kassam, 2005). A quote that was particularly helpful to me during this study was that of novelist Marcel Proust: "The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes" (1923, cited in Bushe & Kassam, 2005, p. 164). The new eyes brought a different perspective on the church and the lives of its members. Towards the end of our LH work, we discussed creating a resource to help our Kingdom Groups integrate the study's findings and AI principles into the church. The metaphor we used to describe this resource was 'Everyday, Everywhere, Extraordinary'. The metaphor, expressed in a simple phrase, provides a different perspective on our daily, ordinary lives and an expectation that the Holy Spirit is present in all that we do. The creation of this generative metaphor has increased the likelihood that the study outcomes will be transformational.

My most significant personal insight into the use of AI is that positivity does not drive change; rather, it is generativity. Drawing on the early concept of generativity by psychoanalyst Erik Erikson (1959) it involves creativity, creating new meaning for things, and adding value, all of which contribute to making the world a better place both now and in the future. This fundamental understanding of generativity aligns with God's plan for the world and, importantly, the role of the Christian within that plan. Although generativity is often associated with change projects, an individual can also lead a generative life. A life that has made a difference and leaves a legacy for the next generation. While not a spiritual concept, generativity resonates with God's plan for the church and its members. Helping participants recognise that their current lives and life stories hold value and can make a difference was one of the key contributions of using AI to the church.

In contemporary human science terms, generativity is regarded as something that encourages us to challenge the status quo and opens us up to new possibilities (Gergen, 1978; 1982). This is quite different from merely identifying what is currently present; generativity does not act as a mirror but as a lens through which we view the future and discover new possibilities. In this study, AI revealed what was already present, but it also guided us towards a vision of the future that was not just more of the same but offered some tentative first steps towards a different future. A future where all of life is regarded as important to God, and a life where the Holy Spirit is active in every situation, not just those that occur within the church.

AI is credited with bringing about transformational change. This is described as “changes in the identity of a system and qualitative changes in the state of being of that system” (Bushe & Kassam, 2005, p. 162). Considering the findings of Bushe & Kassam in their review of 20 cases of using AI to change social systems and the presence or absence of transformational change, I ensured that the two qualities identified as key to transformational change were present in this study. The first was to focus on changing how people think, rather than what they do. The study captured people's thoughts on faith and work, and the collaborative approach was designed to engage both hearts and minds. The 'This is Us' statements all focus on changing hearts and minds by being written in the affirmative future tense, expecting that changes in actions will follow rather than precede.

The second quality involves supporting self-organising change processes that originate from new ideas. This was demonstrated during the LH work and will be a fundamental part of the newly formed DT, enabling them to ‘discover’ what is already happening in the church and to gather fresh ideas from the congregation. In a Pentecostal church setting, this approach is quite different and requires leaders and their teams to empower members of the congregation and give them space to organise themselves. For this reason, the action plan to attain our future state is intentionally flexible, with outcomes left for future teams to define. To promote self-direction and experimentation, the church's infrastructure needs to be realigned, including the roles of the leadership team and the Board of Trustees. Decision-making processes and the allocation of finance and other resources must also support the realisation of the new future state, while ensuring the church's governance requirements are met.

As a church, we are on a journey of transformation, having proposed a future vision that differs significantly from our history as a church-centric organisation. The vision also aims to transform the sacred–secular divide discussed during the storytelling sessions, particularly regarding faith and work.

While in social science terms, generativity drives change in AI, from my Pentecostal background, I found it helpful to relate generativity to the work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit can help us discern the vision God has for a different future and, importantly, empower believers to live that future life. Ephesians 3:20-21 refers to how the power of the Holy Spirit at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than we can ask or imagine. Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) refer to the social existence as a ‘miracle’ and the organisation, or in this setting, the church, as a miracle to be embraced rather than a problem to be solved. This resonates with the Bride of Christ described in Ephesians 5:25-27, a miracle of grace and covenant love. Also, the Body of Christ, described in 1 Corinthians 12:27, is a living miracle formed by the Holy Spirit. By understanding AI's generativity and paradigm as a work of the Spirit, we were able to imagine

a future from God's perspective. This located the study at the centre of the church's life and future, rather than as an organisational change project.

I will now examine specific areas of change within the church resulting from this study that have helped answer this research question. The primary areas of change relate to work and calling, along with some collateral changes that I will briefly outline.

8.2.2.1 Work

This AI study has made a notable contribution to understanding the typical perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours towards secular work. This was demonstrated by the many inspiring stories shared by the participants, where they recognised God's presence in their lives and the connections between their faith and work.

For several participants, recognising the dignity and value in everyday tasks was a journey. Some, such as those in professional roles, could recognise this more easily than those in non-professional roles. As people began to reflect on and share their stories, they realised their work had value, primarily in helping others. Perceptions of the dignity of work have roots in philosophy, with the ancient Greeks viewing work as demeaning and a curse (Tilgher, 1977). Keller (2012) describes Aristotle's view that the ability to live without work is a key aspect of a worthwhile life, supporting Plato's idea that anything involving embodiment, such as work, hampers the soul's pursuit of truth. Being uninvolved in worldly affairs, including work, was seen as necessary for a contemplative life. While acknowledging that work was needed, it was believed that mind-based work held higher value than manual labour. There remains a sense within Western society that recognises the dignity and worth of work among "the 'knowledge classes' who are often well paid, compared to the 'service classes', who may be less well remunerated" (Keller, 2012, p. 47). The gospel, by which I mean God's loving plan of sending Jesus, Jesus' death and resurrection and sending of the Holy Spirit to continue God's plan for the world (Keller, 2012), offers a new perspective, re-framing all types of work, and we must find ways to express this both within and outside the church. This study has provided a way to initiate discussions and reflections on how to achieve this. The work of those involved in caring, homemaking, cleaning, portering, and other service jobs is of equal value. Within the broader context of God's plan for the world, all secular work holds dignity comparable to that of the sacred realm of ministry (Hardy, 1990; Keller, 2012).

While participants could articulate a link between their faith and work, they did not see their stories as part of a broader divine plan for the world. What was missing was an acknowledgement that their actual work

holds inherent value as part of God's *Missio Dei*, through which God is redeeming this world and everything in it back to himself. Their work, whatever form it takes, is part of restoring all things to God. God's providence, his purposeful acts of governing and ordaining all things (Piper, 2020), demonstrates his desire to be fully involved with this world. In the creation narrative, we find God as a worker, forming the world, caring for creation, and providing for humankind, then commissioning workers to continue stewarding this world. The creation mandate remains unchanged, and God's providential oversight of the world and all within it continues. As Christians, we undertake work as part of the original creation mandate. Abraham Kuyper (2013) proposed that work not only takes place to care for creation but has a direct role in structuring and directing it. The work we do is a continuation of God's development of the world (Wolters, 2005) and thus has value in itself. Within Pentecostal eschatology, there is a view that because this earth is temporary, the secular world and everything in it are also temporary. Few IP believers see the current world as a precursor to the new heavens and new earth we eagerly await, as described in Matthew 19:28 and Romans 8:19-25. Work will be fully redeemed only when heaven is united with earth, but in the meantime, work still has worth in God's mission, and the church has much to do to help congregants see how valuable their work is.

Although there is still some way to go, there has been a noticeable shift in the congregation's perception of work in its various forms. By creating an appreciative space for people to discuss their faith and work, it has repositioned work within the church and in personal conversations among the congregation. We still have much to accomplish regarding the true value of work, its part in God's plans, the presence of the Holy Spirit in our secular lives, and our overarching theology of work, which will be part of the legacy work of this study. I will now consider the subject of calling, which is important to the participants and relevant to answering RQ 1.0.

8.2.2.2 Calling

The Let's Chat session questions addressed purpose, what people believed their God-given purpose to be, and how they had experienced that purpose through their work. Most participants associated purpose with calling, with some considering whether the two were the same or different. All participants were either aware of their calling or recognised that God had a calling on their lives but had yet to discover it.

Several participants had previously believed in a two-tier hierarchy of calling, which was endorsed by the Pentecostal church culture they attended at the time. This reflects the observations of Guiness (2003, p. 32) who refers to the dualism of calling proposing there is a "higher vs lower, sacred vs. secular, perfect vs. permitted, contemplation vs. action…" that has emerged from both the Catholic and Protestant traditions. A church role was of higher value and therefore a higher calling, while a secular role was considered a lower

calling. This view, by its nature, narrows the scope of calling and excludes most Christians from it. This also reflects my own experiences as a leader, having participated in many church leadership programs that emphasise the higher calling is to be a full-time pastor, youth leader, or worship leader. This has left some course participants disappointed, as church roles are very limited, and they feel anything else they do is of limited value to God. Interestingly, the study participants describe how, after some years of experience and contemplation of their own faith, their views have changed; now they recognise God's calling as being in what they do, and that their calling changes with the seasons of life. Sadly, more than one participant expressed significant regret that they had not recognised this much earlier in their faith journey.

There is scope for Christians to recognise both their individual and collective callings, which are not about a hierarchy of roles, as both must coexist. As Christians, we live out our personal life roles, but we also share a collective calling alongside other believers to live holy lives, be generous, love others, and speak up for truth and justice. The participants in the study demonstrated an awareness of their collective calling, providing several examples of how they embodied this in their work and community. However, they found it challenging to recognise that their individual work was a calling. Participants were seeking a 'special calling', a specific direction to undertake a role. This may stem from the Pentecostal belief that the Holy Spirit communicates with us and guides us; until then, what we do is merely filling time until that 'special' calling is revealed. Occasionally, the Holy Spirit speaks to us about a particular job or life role, like becoming a foster carer, an adoptive parent, or making a career change. Most often, we live out our calling through our everyday, ordinary lives without such direct guidance. Overlooking these daily experiences as part of living out our calling is a missed opportunity to witness God's purposes and the Holy Spirit's activity in our daily lives and the world around us. To address this, greater emphasis must be placed on helping Christians recognise the Holy Spirit at work in their everyday lives, rather than adopting a 'filling station' mentality of 'topping up' with the Holy Spirit on a Sunday because we don't encounter the Holy Spirit during the week. The challenge is that by re-emphasising the individual calling, we should not then neglect our collective calling to advocate for truth, justice, mercy, and compassion in our communities and society.

There was an understanding, as participants reflected on their lives and the different ways they have lived out their callings, that our expressed callings evolve through the seasons of life. This was not limited to those who were retired; young adults discussed their transition from students to work, and for some, to marriage. The self-reflection during the Let's Chat stage of AI was clear, as participants found the words to describe the changes in seasons and how their calling shifted at each stage. Some felt they had experienced seasons when God's calling was not visible and even suggested that they once had a calling but that it was no longer present. As I read these transcripts, it was clear that they believed a calling should be clearly connected

to the church or involve doing something God has explicitly directed them to do. This stems from the sacred-secular divide rather than a holistic response to calling and returns us to the work of Dennis (2008). She helpfully describes her varied vocational journey through the different seasons of her life. Also reflecting on the work of clinical psychologist John Neafsey (2006), is helpful as he presents a broader view of vocation that encompasses who we are as individuals, our integrity and authenticity in embracing all of life. Neafsey also adds to the discussions on Holy Spirit guidance, suggesting that rather than a specific word, we are often responding to "the divine source of wisdom, mysteriously both beyond and within ourselves" (p. 6) to guide our lives.

Numerous areas still require attention, and we intend to expand on Sherman's (2011) work on vocational stewardship, which is discussed in Chapter 2, under the working title 'Faithful practice in everyday work' for this upcoming activity. Sherman's exploration of vocational stewardship is grounded in Proverbs 11:10a: "When it goes well with the righteous, the city rejoices". Keller (2011) builds on this context in Sherman's work by highlighting the importance of the congregation utilising their God-given vocational power for the city's benefit, providing a glimpse of God's Kingdom to the world. How this will be realised in a small, former mining town with a multicultural Pentecostal congregation promises to be a fascinating and enjoyable appreciative discussion.

8.2.2.3 Sacred-secular divide

There were several examples in the data of people recognising a sacred-secular divide regarding their activities outside the church and those within it. Some participants could not explain why they felt this way but believed it stemmed from an unspoken culture; others provided clear examples of how this was reflected within teams and by leaders. The confusion and frustration caused by this were evident and described by Tozer (1993) as "wholly unnecessary and due to a misunderstanding of a divide that does not exist within the New Testament" (p. 111). The result is a divide between the importance of church on a Sunday and our Monday-to-Saturday lives. Greene's assertion that the main issue is not that we have failed to see work as significant but that we have "failed to regard all of life as significant." (2010, p. 13), has led the church into a broader discussion of whole-life discipleship.

There are, of course, external societal influences that perpetuate the sacred-secular divide, not all of which are caused by the church. Kim et al. (2012) mentions the division of faith into the private sphere of the church, where faith can be freely expressed, and the public sphere, where expressing faith is discouraged, as contributing to the sacred-secular divide.

There is much within AI, especially the theory of generativity, that unites the sacred and the secular. It discusses the 'miracle of life' and suggests that AI is a search for what gives life to living systems, not only organisations but communities, families, and relationships. To achieve this, those things regarded as sacred must be brought into contact with the secular for change to occur. Cooperrider, in reviewing his original AI article (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987), emphasises the importance of "reuniting the sacred and the secular" (Cooperrider, et al., 2013, p. 12). AI offers an "appreciative literacy for finding values and visions in our ordinary daily life of work, leadership and human organising" (Cooperrider, et al., 2013, p. 13), which helps to move beyond what he describes as a "secularised problem-solving frame" (p. 12), referring here to traditional action research. The essence of storytelling within AI encompasses not only the factual events of a story but also the values, beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes of the storyteller, thereby offering a more comprehensive view of life and contributing to the answers to the original research questions of this study.

I agree with Volf (in Scharen, 2008), that faith communities have not always offered a compelling vision of living life where faith is central to everything, which this study aims to address within the congregation. For those in leadership roles in a Pentecostal church or those undertaking formal or informal leadership training, little time is dedicated to helping people live an integrated life. We know how to do mission, build the church, develop teams, and conduct ministry, but very little about overcoming the sacred-secular divide. This study offers insights into maintaining a living faith in all areas of life, enabling participants to openly discuss and reflect on why they perceive or experience a sacred-secular divide as part of their evolving views on calling and work. This information will be crucial for the ongoing work of this study.

8.2.2.4 Discipleship

One aspect that emerged from the study, which I did not expect, was the substantial value placed on personal connections and peer interactions in helping each other navigate their faith and work situations. Participants emphasised the importance of peers sharing their experiences, wisdom gained from life circumstances, and their lived theology as ordinary people. The power of hearing testimonies about real-life situations, including challenges as well as victories, was also significant. By embracing this perspective, we have been able to think differently about discipleship, which now focuses much more on how learning moves from being individual to benefiting others.

These findings reflect Butler's (2023a) work with Methodist churches exploring discipleship. He found that congregants' primary learning environment for nurturing their everyday faith is in everyday life, not the formal patterns of church activity. Learning and growth in faith occurred in external places "in the context of conversations and caring relationships" (p. 21). This has led us to consider alternative ways to

support the growth of these informal opportunities without turning them into formal church activities. We have encouraged our Kingdom Group leaders to explore less formal relationship-building activities in non-church settings as a starting point for this process of discovery. As a Pastor, I resist the tendency within the Pentecostal tradition to have numerous formal church activities throughout the week, instead creating space for people to develop caring relationships organically, where faith can grow naturally.

8.2.2.5 The gathered church

The study produced information that impacts the entire way of working of the church, as the AI process seeks to improve the system as a whole, not just a part of it. This 'wholeness' principle is important in maintaining the life-giving approach of AI (Waddock 2024). It is the dynamic interactions and relationships within the church that are important, and the energy they create is vital to the change.

The findings of this study have changed the way we think about the role of Pastors and leaders in the church. The leadership role required to embed these study findings is one that "fosters faith's guiding impact on daily life" (Scharen, 2008, p. 117). There is a shift from the traditional central role of Pastors in instructing and guiding congregants to a leadership style that involves coming alongside, accompanying people on their journey — a discipleship journey we undertake together. This does not negate the leader's role in oversight and direction; it simply offers a relational approach to doing so. The AI process has emphasised the importance of peers in supporting others on their faith journeys and the need for leaders to create space for this to happen. Within the Pentecostal tradition, this requires a substantial cultural shift from the belief that the pastor knows and directs everything to a more decentralised approach. While AI has influenced our leadership style, it cannot overcome poor leadership practices (Bushe, 2007), these must be addressed separately to avoid impacting the generativity of AI.

The roles of the Trustees, decision-making, and resource allocation are part of the entire church system, and for an AI study to be carried out effectively, all these elements must adapt accordingly. Any leader considering undertaking an AI study must be willing to make changes to how the church operates to achieve the desired future generated from the AI process. These discussions are supported by the evidence gathered in the study. Using AI has enabled us to obtain this information through participants' stories and to bring about early changes in our attitudes and perceptions of secular work.

8.3. Can an Appreciative Inquiry approach to Theological Action Research assist in the co-production of a change in attitudes and beliefs? (RQ2)

AI has two key attributes that foster co-production within this change approach: collaboration and storytelling. These will now be briefly discussed. AI is highly collaborative; it guides participants on a shared journey, aiming to engage hearts and minds, shift attitudes and beliefs, and ultimately bring about behavioural change. Much of this collaboration occurs through empowered storytelling and the relationships that develop during speaking and listening. I also address two key barriers in the use of AI: an overemphasis on the positive and the lack of dedicated opportunities for reflection throughout AI.

8.3.1 AI is collaborative

One of the key principles of AI is that it should be collaborative (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987, p. 13). AI is described as "…a collaborative, and highly participative system-wide approach…" (Watkins, et al., 2011, p. 22). This was one of the main reasons I chose to adopt this approach in my study, as I recognise that collaboration has a much better chance of engaging people's hearts and minds rather than imposing change on them.

AI views organisations, in this case a church, as socially constructed realities, so involving as many people as possible is crucial. I was unsure about the level of collaboration that could be achieved due to the unfamiliarity with conducting research within an IP church setting, and during the Let's Chat phase, COVID-19 restrictions were in effect. The storytelling had to be done via technology, which could have been a barrier, but using the same technology we use each Sunday to connect as an online church proved beneficial.

Achieving 75.5% adult engagement in the study confirmed that this would be a collaborative effort. The ease with which I recruited nine members to the LH was also reassuring. While engaging people is an integral part of collaboration, it also involves empowering them—giving a sense of control over aspects of the study—and demonstrating that their contributions influence and shape the outcomes. This truly reflects genuine collaboration. I believe participants saw this study as a collaborative effort, and their contributions are evident in the 'This is Us' statements, which contain 44 words or phrases taken from the participants' stories. The LH's reflective exercise also affirmed that the study was highly collaborative.

Vondey (2011) suggests that Pentecostals have an inherent drive towards collaboration, as evidenced by their desire for Christian unity and shared witness. Lord (2011) offers a similar view that the flexible network structures within Pentecostalism promote collaboration driven by this inherent drive. Acts 2 describes

several communal practices recognised within the Pentecostal tradition, all of which contribute to the health of the church and the realisation of its mission. While I recognise these collaborative activities within Sunday practices and between churches, I have not experienced internal collaboration with congregants regarding the church's future vision. Whitehead (2019) found that a key factor in developing commitment among a Pentecostal congregation was fostering collaboration by a leader. AI is a valuable approach for leaders to foster the inherent drive towards collaborative activities within the church. It is through this collaboration that the co-production of change in attitudes and beliefs towards work and faith has taken place in the church involved in this study.

8.3.2 AI empowers storytelling

Most Christians are familiar with using stories to influence their actions, either through sharing testimonies or storytelling in Scripture, with parables being a notable example. In this study, it was clear that storytelling is a powerful way for people to share their past and present life experiences, drawing us into a broader narrative of God's movement in the lives of his ordinary people. The stories served as a rear-view mirror, helping people remember the past while also moving towards the future. The stories were impactful as people shared their life journeys. The act of storytelling was life-giving and created a space where individuals recognised, sometimes for the first time, that God was at work in their lives outside of a church setting.

Ten individuals acted as ‘hosts’ for the storytelling, and their preparation was vital to its success. The term ‘host’ was chosen to create a familiar, welcoming atmosphere where the host makes the guest feel at ease and offers full attention. Attentive and active listening was crucial. The behaviour of the hosts significantly influenced how participants' ideas and views were received.

Storytelling plays an essential role in AI and is recognised within the Pentecostal tradition through the sharing of testimony. Traditionally, testimonies focused on people coming to faith, miracles of provision, or healing. Daniel (2006) describes testimony as “A practice consisting of the spoken story of how you experience God, offered in the context of community worship” (p. 12). It offers an opportunity to speak of God in the ordinary spaces of life. The study has altered the importance and role of testimony within the church. Testimonies now frequently feature in the Sunday service, and time is set aside in the Kingdom Groups for individuals to share their stories about work, home, family, and community, thereby passing on their life wisdom through stories that might have remained unspoken in the past.

The study stories demonstrated how God intervenes in daily life and how the Holy Spirit guides and prompts individuals to join in with God’s work in their daily routines. The stories contained rich insights, and

as people shared their experiences, they began to appreciate that their stories held value; they were a source of lived theology and wisdom. Their stories helped others, and it was through sharing these stories that others saw their faith grow. This concept of creating a space where the learning moves from being individual to benefiting others is essential and reflects a model of discipleship described in section 8.2.2.4. Empowered storytelling, achieved using AI, has assisted in the co-production of change in this study.

8.3.3 Barriers to overcome in the use of AI

For this study, I have decided to concentrate on two barriers to the use of AI: that AI overemphasises positive aspects and therefore overlooks negativity, and discussions regarding the level of reflection involved in the AI process.

8.3.3.1 Overemphasis on the positive

When first encountering AI, it may seem a simple form of positive action research, offering a remedy of asset-focused happiness because AI is often described as "focusing on the positive" (e.g. Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010). Positivity is vital because it supports the achievement of generativity (Bushe, 2007), helping people avoid focusing solely on deficiencies and weaknesses, which can prevent them from recognising the value in their experiences and expressing hope for a different future. Some critics express concern that by emphasising the positive, negative voices are silenced and the significance of negative feelings and opinions is ignored in an AI study (Barge & Oliver, 2003; Fineman, 2006). The focus of AI is generativity, as discussed in Chapter 3 and earlier in this chapter, not positivity. The leaders of any AI activity must recognise that both positive and negative voices play an essential role within an organisation, in this case, a church. Having gained in-depth experience with AI, I agree with Bright et al. (2013), the challenge lies in fostering an environment where the negative voices do not lead people into a downward spiral of dysfunction, but rather where the negative is acknowledged. The value of their experiences becomes part of the generativity process, and the hidden images of hope are revealed, which offer an alternative perspective going forward.

Johnson (2013) reflects on her own journey of "coming to understand the life-giving tension of light and shadow at the heart of AI" (p. 189). She points out the historical tendency in AI to differentiate AI from action research and other approaches by using an either/or dynamic (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). Study descriptions, Johnson observes, can be described with polar opposites - "generative AI *or* traditional action research; we can focus on the positive *or* the negative, the problems *or* the possibilities " (2013, p. 190. author italics), when in reality, both can coexist. Human experiences generate both positive and negative emotions,

the latter often referred to as ‘shadow’ emotions (Campbell, 1977). While shadow can mean negative emotions, it can also include a number of repressed things, such as a hidden talent or skill, particularly when it is perceived as boasting to declare a talent (Fitzgerald, et al., 2010). Engaging with both the shadow and light of human feelings and organisational experiences is crucial, especially in a church setting where individuals and families face significant events such as life-limiting illness and bereavement, or the whole church deals with a leadership failure.

Johnson (2013) describes her work with students, using AI workshops to help them integrate their sense of self as applied behavioural science practitioners and stories of working with teams supporting homeless youth. This work contains some powerful stories and emotions. My learning from this work is that in the AI process, you sometimes need to create space to step into the world of others with genuine empathy, allowing connection with shadow emotions. Then, at the right moment, channel the energy of feelings like anger or despair towards the realisation of the desired future. As I reflect on this approach, I recall the period during the study when, as a congregation, we experienced the consecutive deaths of three young men and consider what space I created for the families and friends to express the shade and light of their grief experiences. Johnson (2013) refers to AI as turning up the light, rather like a theatre spotlight, and how shadows naturally emerge. In the theatre, both the light and shade are essential as the shadows “create an emotional tone in support of the content” (p. 192). This resonates with how we live out our lives faithfully as Christians: we have seasons when the pain of the shadows is interwoven with the light of the gospel, and we must embrace the whole. This presents a challenge within a Pentecostal setting, where positivity is a strong tenet of faith, and negative words and emotions are regarded as a lack of faith. The concept of lament in our tradition is not prevalent, and it can restrict our ability to connect with those who are grieving and those who have suffered emotional or physical pain. In a church that is culturally diverse, it also reduces our ability to connect with those who have suffered due to situations within their culture. The AI work of Duncan & Ridley-Duff (2014) with marginalised Pakistani women in Sheffield is a significant resource in adapting and contextualising the use of AI. The disadvantages faced by the women were previously untold stories until this AI project. The stories led women to think critically and creatively about their lives, identities, and power. The study builds on the work of Grant & Humphries (2006), in developing a bridge between AI and critical theory to consider the influences of power and other societal experiences within the AI process. There is a shift within AI towards developing Critical Appreciative Processes, advanced by Grant & Humphries (2006) and Ridley-Duff & Duncan (2015), which will be of significance as I take this AI study forward into the life of the church.

Returning to this study, participants reported negative experiences related to their calling to secular work, the sacred-secular divide, and the perceived lack of value of church activities in helping them address these life experiences. By asking questions about what was missing in those situations, what they wanted to see more of, and what the church would look like in the future to fill those gaps, they were then able to articulate their hope for a different future. As a nurse and researcher, I would liken my role to that of a midwife, assisting in the birth of something new that emerges from a painful experience. Since no two births are the same, neither are the ways to facilitate hope from a negative, often painful experience for a participant. It involves being constantly alert to what participants are saying and feeling, acting as a flexible guide during storytelling, and adjusting the AI process to help bring about the birth of the desired future. I am quite convinced that how the AI process is handled by those leading it is central to achieving generativity. Whilst I agree with Pegram (2017) that the actual AI model is simple to understand and apply, I have realised it is not simple to facilitate.

The Centre for Appreciative Inquiry (2024) has identified a set of competencies to enhance understanding of the skills and application of AI. These competencies encompass both technical skills and behavioural expectations essential for success in implementing the AI approach. I found these incredibly useful during my research journey. To effectively demonstrate these competencies, such as utilising emotional intelligence, navigating interpersonal dynamics, emotional currents, and expressing empathy, the researcher must maintain close involvement with the research and participants. The highly collaborative nature of this study within a close-knit church community has facilitated my application and development of these competencies. Additionally, I recognise the guidance and discernment of the Holy Spirit, which has helped me explore the shadows in the stories.

AI cannot be reduced to a process or cycle, such as the 5-D cycle used in this study. The reification of AI as a ‘thing’ separates it conceptually from “the people who engage and enact it” (Fitzgerald, et al., 2010, p. 221). The experience of the AI practitioner, their attunement with self and others, is equally important in AI practice and is central to avoiding an overly positive dialogue that does not recognise the shadow aspects of an experience (Fitzgerald, et al., 2010). By liberating AI from restrictive processes or a one-sided focus on positivity, it provides the opportunity to create a more holistic future state and sustainable change, addressing one of its main criticisms.

8.3.3.2 Lack of dedicated opportunities for reflection throughout AI

While proponents of AI see it as reflective throughout (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005; Boyd & Bright, 2007; McSherry, et al., 2018; Davies-Abbott, 2025), others do not (Grant & Humphries, 2006;

Fitzgerald, et al., 2010; Clouder & King, 2015; Treacy, 2022). I initially agreed that AI is a reflective approach, but after exploring the method in more detail before beginning this study, I concluded that it was possible, once the storytelling data had been collected, to proceed with the later stages of AI without any reflection. There is a significant amount of reflection during the Let's Chat discussions, but few pauses for reflection are evident within the model after that point.

I was concerned that this might become merely a change model instead of a study seeking to hear the voices of ordinary people within a church congregation, exploring their everyday theology. To address these concerns, I added an extra stage to the Appreciating Theology model, which involved reflection. AI is not a fixed process; each stage does not need to follow a strict order, and therefore, the reflective stage was implemented at key points in the project.

I incorporated reflective activities during the "Let's Learn" stage of the process using a modified TAR and four voices approach. I chose the TAR reflective exercise because its roots lie in theological action research (Cameron, et al., 2010), which aligns with AI as a form of action research. I also introduced the LH to the four voices of theology as a form of reflection. The reflections from these two exercises are summarised in Chapter 7. In terms of adding to the project, the LH members and I found it a helpful step that anchored the project in theology, but I recognise that whilst its use may have contributed very little to the academic study of TAR or the four voices, it achieved the purpose I set out to provide a theological reflective scaffolding for the study. Later in the Let's Learn stage of the study, I also included a reflective valuation by the LH on participating in the study; these results are included in Chapter 7. Within AI, the term 'valuation' is used for an appreciative approach to evaluation (Watkins, et al., 2011). This was a reflective exercise that yielded interesting and encouraging feedback and reflections on their experiences with the study. It was particularly helpful to me as an insider researcher to hear their views. It confirmed that the Appreciating Theology model had fulfilled its purpose and that participating in the study had been enjoyable, fostering energy and anticipation for the envisioned future.

While I would not claim that a specific model of theological reflection significantly influences the AI process more than another, I would argue that for those working with AI in a church setting, it is essential to include some form of reflective activity. Our aim is not to change an organisation; rather, we aim to listen to the everyday theology of the congregants, "If the Spirit of God is in and among his people, then God can and will speak through them" (Pegram, 2017, p. 76). Astley (2002) argues that ordinary theology, theology that is lived and reflected in everyday life, involves both empirical research and theological reflection. AI brings value to the ordinary stories of ordinary people. Theological reflection offers a vital space within AI, where faith and lived experience can be held in dialogue, enabling meaning to be discerned in everyday life. If

changes in praxis are the desired outcome, then theological reflection is essential to AI. Indeed, within this study, the aim was to begin with practice, explore theological resources, including reflection, and return to transformed practice (Browning, 1991; Swinton & Mowat, 2016).

8.4 What are the implications for leaders of Independent Pentecostal churches in leading the gathered church for a scattered life? (RQ3)

To answer this research question, I must first examine how this study has contributed to my own learning and its implications for the church I lead as a pastor. I will then consider the implications for my peers and suggest any further potential beneficiaries from this study.

8.4.1 Contribution to my pastoral ministry practice

I found engaging in this study to be very rewarding, and the findings have greatly enhanced my learning, growth, and practice as an individual, pastor, and researcher. As an individual, there is something about AI that becomes part of who you are and influences your behaviour. I have realised that appreciating becomes instinctive; recognising the light in all things comes through practice and active listening. I now regularly engage in reflective journaling, a practice I developed during this study. I recognise its significance both spiritually, as a researcher, and as a human being. It is a habit I will continue, as it has helped me maintain an appreciative outlook in all areas of life, especially during the challenges of writing this thesis.

As a pastor, the study's findings align with my initial view that, as a church, we have not valued secular callings as much as ministry callings. I have had to reflect on my own practices, the culture I foster, my leadership influence, and how I listen to the voices of ordinary people within the congregation to help restore this balance and achieve the future described in this study.

An AI study requires full commitment from leaders and a willingness to dedicate considerable time and resources to the process. AI must become a core approach to all aspects of church life for any changes to be sustainable. This posed a significant risk for me in my pastoral role, as the leader with overall responsibility for the direction and well-being of the congregation. The findings from this study have led to a complete re-evaluation of my own role and how I lead the church. Creating spaces for the ordinary theology and life wisdom of the congregants to be developed and shared, helping people discern the activity of the Holy Spirit in their daily lives, has become a priority. In many ways, this was a solitary journey, as I lacked a pastoral peer group outside of church to turn to for support. It felt like a path no other IP pastor had taken in the North East, and I am certain some could not understand why we chose to undertake this journey.

Nevertheless, I am confident that this journey is a vital part of our God-given purpose and that we are exemplifying something that can benefit other churches.

As an AI researcher, I am creating worlds through the questions I ask in environments that I, as a pastor, care about deeply. Engaging with congregants relationally to co-construct reality, advance current practice, and develop new ideas has been an adventure. Many times, during the research journey, it felt as if we were building the bridge while walking on it—uncertain about how to collaboratively co-construct the future of the church, how congregants would engage, and how to embed changes into the culture.

I have experienced the tensions of juggling the roles of pastor and researcher, as I cannot neatly separate my experiences in both capacities. How this unfolds in the ongoing work of this study will be interesting. As a researcher, there will be actions and decisions that require applying my academic knowledge, but as a pastor, I recognise that individuals must be allowed to learn through personal experience. I draw on the previous analogy of my role as a midwife, aiming for a safe delivery and a positive outcome. Much of the birthing process depends on the actions and experiences of the person giving birth. The role of the midwife is to observe and monitor, intervening only when necessary. As a pastor, my instinct is to take over the process to ensure a safe delivery and the well-being of all involved. I am aware that my research knowledge and experience have grown considerably during this study. I also recognise that my pastoral knowledge and experience, by the nature of this being a collaborative study involving my congregation, have also increased. I am, therefore, confident that I can undertake both roles in the ongoing work resulting from this study.

There are things I would have approached differently during this research journey. I have previously outlined some personal and leadership behavioural adjustments I would have made. Regarding this AI study, I would have promoted greater member checking by participants, both the transcripts and the final themes. The LH did an incredible job of representing their people well from the transcripts, but I am aware that, in both high-quality research terms (Birt, et al., 2016) and AI generativity terms (Bushe, 2011), wider involvement of the original 34 participants would have been beneficial. In a similar way, I would have encouraged more people to act as hosts, as ideally the storyteller swaps roles from telling to listening, thereby fostering greater generativity in an AI study. Having said that, this was the first time that academic research had taken place in the church, and I was encouraged and relieved by the level of engagement.

I have already indicated that I view theological reflection as a key part of a theological AI study. Both the TAR and four voices approaches were new to me, and I am uncertain if I handled them effectively. I need to consider whether I require more experience and theoretical understanding of these approaches, or if a different reflective method might be more suitable. During a pre-study discussion with Dr Helen Cameron, the

principal developer of TAR, she was unaware of the TAR guidelines having previously been included in an AI study and suggested that a post-study discussion with the ARCS team would be helpful for reflecting on the study and exploring how this integration could be improved. I plan to pursue this suggestion.

My learning journey has been extensive, and I play a significant role in helping to achieve the 'This is Us' statements alongside members of the congregation. There is still much for me to learn within the future plans of this study.

8.4.2 Contribution to the congregation

This study has contributed to the church in many ways, not least in developing a strong culture of collaboration and engagement in the current and future life of the gathered and scattered church. The level of engagement in the study exceeded my expectations, particularly in an IP church tradition where participating in academic research is virtually unheard of. The challenges will be maintaining this collaborative culture, engaging new members of the church, and ensuring that contributions from people of different cultures are recognised and valued in the ongoing plans.

The church now has a very different perception of calling, work, ministry and whole-life discipleship. This is evident in conversations, testimonies, and celebrations of achievements in the everyday lives of congregants. There is a greater expectation of Holy Spirit encounters outside of Sunday and less reliance on the Sunday topping-up approach.

The church ministries are beginning to consider how the findings and the 'This Is Us' statements become relevant to their specific areas. The Sunday services now incorporate the study's findings, and the teaching is focused on applying the Bible to everyday life. Two home group leaders have volunteered to join the DT, which will help engage all home group leaders. The youth and children's ministries are in the very early stages of exploration. The community outreach ministry has already aligned with activities outside the church, such as meal deliveries by our local football club and supporting a community pantry initiative. Team members are also running a Job Club in the local community. These may have taken place despite the study. What is different is a much greater awareness that the Holy Spirit is at work outside of Sunday church, and excitement that we are joining in the *Missio Dei*.

As previously mentioned, significant reforms to the church's internal processes have been necessary, and there is still much more work to be done. As a church, we are exploring the next steps regarding finding a formal network or a Pentecostal denomination to join for our future development. Interestingly, the findings of

this study have ruled out some options, as they conflict with the direction and strategy of certain Pentecostal denominations. These would lead us back into a Sunday and church ministry-focused culture, which the study has helped us move away from. This presents an interesting challenge; although we have a clear sense of direction for the church, it has narrowed our options for formal networking.

8.4.3 Contribution to church leaders

The study's findings and the AI methodological approach offer insights into the everyday theology expressed by congregational members. Although this study has limited generalisability because it is based on the findings of a very specific congregation, I suggest that it can still make a valuable contribution to my peers. I would encourage my peers not to be deterred by the length or depth of this study, but rather to begin with some appreciative conversations and build on this approach. I propose the key contributions for my leadership peers are:

- AI can have a key role in hearing the ordinary theology of the congregation and provides a place where the valuable practical wisdom (phronesis) of the congregation can be articulated.
- Recognising the value of peer-to-peer learning as highlighted in this study and creating space for this to take place is of value in the faith learning of the congregation
- Revitalise testimony sharing by including real-life experiences, particularly living out faith in life's challenges, which also assists personal growth
- Consider creating naturally occurring spaces where people can tell stories and explore their faith
- The congregation desire a whole-of-life approach to their faith and work and wants the church to assist them in living this way.
- The importance the congregation places on giving secular work and callings equal recognition alongside those regarded as sacred is significant. People want help to know their callings, and for the leadership and the church to give equal recognition to all of life's callings in all seasons of life. The leader has a crucial role in shaping the culture that promotes this view.
- If undertaking an AI approach, be prepared to change how you lead, the format and priorities of the gathered Sunday and mid-week church activities and your church infrastructures, to achieve transformative change.

8.5 Contribution to knowledge

This study has made a significant contribution to the body of knowledge on faith and work adding to the work of Cosden (1998), Miller (2003), Dik & Duffy (2012), and Greene et al (2018), to name but a few. It

offers insights into attitudes and beliefs about faith and work and presents AI as a means to foster change in these perspectives. Additionally, it provides UK-specific knowledge in a field where most studies, resources, and information originate from the USA. While these resources and studies are highly valuable, they can be challenging to adapt to the UK's culture. An important text on AI in a church setting is the work of Branson (2016), again a USA resource. This study adds to this particular body of knowledge by providing a UK church study that has utilised the full AI cycle. This research also advances the limited body of academic work concerning UK IP churches.

The study adds to the growing body of research on AI, both in general and within church settings. It highlights the importance of generativity in AI and enhances understanding by modelling a dialogical OD approach to the change project. In doing so, it also addresses some critiques of the positive focus of AI. Including theological reflection in this congregational AI study is a valuable addition, but further research is needed to determine the most suitable model.

The study contributes to the work of Cartledge (2016) as similarly, "the centrality of this study was to listen to, record and reflect upon the 'ordinary theology' of congregational members in relation to a number of key themes" (p. 10). In this study, the themes were faith and work. The emphasis on the congregants' stories and renewed congregational praxis described throughout this thesis further adds to this work. This study has brought together personal testimonies with the broader dialogue of the Pentecostal tradition and the insights of a social science research approach rooted in social construction. This study was not a study of ordinary theology *per se*, but it suggests how AI could be used to identify a congregation's ordinary theology.

There are key findings from this study, such as the importance of relational conversations, the role of peers in faith learning, and recognising that learning takes place in everyday life, which contribute to Butler's work in challenging the usual narratives of discipleship (Butler, 2020; Butler, 2023b; Butler, 2023a). The study also has the potential to inform the work of the LICC in several areas, including calling, the sacred-secular divide, faith in everyday life and work, Sunday gatherings, and whole-life discipleship. The Appreciating Church Christian ecumenical project has requested that the study be presented to them, adding it to their case studies for churches to access.

A worthwhile area for further AI research is investigating the shadow experiences encountered by congregation members and the application of a critical appreciative approach. This would expand the work of Duncan (2014), Ridley-Duff & Duncan (2015), Haji & Heath (2025) and Fitzgerald et al. (2010) in a completely different setting, that of a church congregation. We have identified several potential areas where

AI could be utilised for future research, including parenting, relationships, the value of older people in the church, opportunities for people with disabilities, and sharing one's faith. Any one of these areas will have the dual presence of light and shade and could form a viable extension to our knowledge in AI.

8.6 Final thoughts

AI has enabled us to listen to and appreciate the everyday stories of ordinary people within the congregation. AI has proven to be a valuable resource for the church, offering meaningful and transformative insights into how secular work is understood within our Pentecostal beliefs. It has provided a way to uncover congregants' rich narratives on their lived experiences of faith in this postmodern society and has inspired recognition of their agency in the present, empowering them to co-create the future. A meaningful vision of the future has been developed, rooted in their life-affirming stories. Sharing in this journey with the congregation has been a privilege. The original 34 study participants accounted for 75.5% of the 45 adults in the church. Due to growth during the study's timeframe, this now represents only 45.3% of the 75 adults attending the church. It is therefore important that the legacy of this study extends beyond the completion of this thesis. I look forward to engaging new members of the congregation in our collective journey into an exciting future.

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Appendix 1. Let's Chat Questions

Let's Chat Storytelling Format – Faith & Work

Thank you for agreeing to tell your stories and to host someone else sharing their stories. Being a host is a very special role, it is the role of an attentive friend, listening to every word and encouraging the storyteller by using words and body language that lets them know what they are saying is important. Whilst anonymity is not possible during the storytelling the information will be kept as private as possible and the notes will be identified by a pseudonym (fictitious name) for the period of the study.

The researcher will set up the Zoom meeting and be present at the start to remind participants that the session is being recorded and to confirm all individuals consent to this. Once the recording starts the researcher will leave the meeting only returning when contacted by the session Host to confirm the session has ended. The researcher will stop the recording and manage the transfer of the audio file to be transcribed.

I need to capture the two individuals telling their stories on two separate Zoom meetings to produce two separate transcripts. All this means for you is that once one person has finished their storytelling session you contact the researcher via the text number provided, and they will end the first Zoom meeting and start the second one. You do not have to know how to use Zoom to be a Host or a storyteller.

If you are the Host please introduce yourself and make sure the storyteller is comfortable to start the session. Most importantly, enjoy the time together, keep a natural pace allowing time for pause and reflection, share positive memories, hopes and dreams.

The questions below are designed to help maintain the flow and focus of the storytelling.

Introduction
By way of introduction can you tell me a little about yourself, the types of work you have done and are currently doing? By work I mean paid, unpaid and voluntary activities that take place outside of church.
How long have you been a Christian? What do you like about attending a Pentecostal church?

Storytelling

1. God created us all for a purpose. What do you see as your God given purpose?

2. Tell me about a time when you have experienced that purpose in what you do as work.

3. Why do you work?

4. Can you describe a time when you have felt good about the work that you do?
   What was it about that situation that made you feel good?

5. God has given us all skills in order to help one another (or others), describe your greatest skills, attributes and abilities.
   Can you give some examples of when you have felt your skills, attributes and abilities have been used in your work?
   Can you describe how that made you feel?

6. Tell me about a time when you have felt your faith and work have connected in a positive way?
   What was it about this time that made you feel this was a positive experience?

7. Can you describe a time when you have felt fruitful in you work? What was it that made you feel that way?

8. Tell me about a time, in any church you have attended, when something really helped you understand what it means to be a Christian in your area of work? What was it that really helped you? Who was involved?

9. If you could imagine a church in the future that would be a significant help to you in the area of your faith and work, describe 2 - 3 things you would want that church to be doing?

   Thank you for sharing your stories. Is there anything else you would like to add about your faith and work?