

Caring About Growth:

*A theological critique of church growth
through a hermeneutic of disability*

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AtoE	From Anecdote to Evidence (report)
CGM	Church Growth Movement
CGRP	Church Growth Research Programme
CofE	Church of England
RR	Renewal and Reform (programme)
RTF	Resourcing the Future (report)
NPM	New Public Management (discourse)
SGPF	Setting God’s People Free (report)

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SHORT ABSTRACT

This thesis explores ecclesiology through the lens of disability, offering a critical and constructive account of church growth within the Church of England. It argues that contemporary growth strategies, exemplified by the *Renewal and Reform* (RR) programme (2015), are increasingly shaped by market-oriented logics of efficiency, measurability, and optimisation. Within such frameworks, congregations become construed as units of productivity, flourishing is equated with expansion, and decline is rendered synonymous with failure. This shift risks reducing the church to a triumphant organisation oriented toward survival and replication, rather than recognising it as the pilgrim body of Christ.

Methodologically, the thesis develops a mode of critical ecclesiology pursued through comparative political theology within a cultural–linguistic register. Drawing on Nancy Eiesland’s symbolic linkage between the church and the disabled body as a theological heuristic, it analyses how ecclesial metaphors, strategic texts, and institutional discourse encode normative assumptions about strength, vitality, autonomy, and success. A hermeneutic of disability thus functions both critically—exposing the ableist and economistic assumptions implicit in dominant ecclesial imaginaries—and constructively, by reorienting theological judgment towards vulnerability, interdependence, and finitude as constitutive of ecclesial life.

The argument unfolds in two parts. First, it offers a historical and critical analysis of contemporary decline discourse in the Church of England, situating *Renewal and Reform* within wider patterns of institutional response while interrogating the technologisation of mission through growth-oriented language and strategy. Second, it develops a reparative ecclesiological account informed by disability theology, liberationist commitments to praxis, and care ethics, placing rival accounts of ecclesial flourishing into sustained theological comparison rather than proposing a singular alternative model.

The thesis concludes that caring about growth is insufficient unless reformed through an ethic of care. To acknowledge the church as a disabled body is to recognise decline not as loss nor growth as mere success, but both as sites in which God’s grace is disclosed through embodied, interdependent life together. In this way, the thesis contends that the Church of England may yet find renewal, not through optimisation or expansion, but through the grace of becoming a church that takes care seriously.

LONG ABSTRACT

This thesis is about ecclesiology through the lens of disability. More specifically, it offers a critical reflection on the necessity for the theology of the church, as the body of Christ, to be attuned to the concrete realities, motifs, and textures that influence and sustain the Christian community. At its core, the argument advanced here is that the church, as the body of Christ, needs to remain shrewd, attuned to the political and social pressures that shape (or resist) the dominant organising logic of the prevailing culture. The church, after all, is not unaffected by the hegemony of its time. This need for theological attentiveness is particularly pressing for the Church of England, where theological identity is increasingly negotiated through strategies mirroring the managerial logic of the market.

In recent decades, declining attendance figures, diminishing financial resources, and a succession of public failures have converged to generate a pervasive sense of institutional fragility. In response, the *Renewal and Reform* (RR) programme, a strategic initiative launched in 2015, emerged as the principal vehicle for addressing decline and pursuing growth. Central to the RR programme and other similar initiatives is the rise of a managerial language of efficiency, measurability, and optimisation: dashboards of statistics, performance metrics, and strategic targets have become embedded within ecclesial governance and discourse. Within this discourse, church growth is predominantly construed in numerical terms, whereby congregations are seemingly imagined as units of productivity, growth is framed in relation to survival and replication, and quantifiable outcomes measure the flourishing church.

This thesis argues that such a construal of growth risks instrumentalising the church by reframing it as a managed organisation rather than recognising it as the body of Christ. Accordingly, the extent to which the privileging of autonomy, growth, and productivity stands in tension with the biblical image of the church as a body—whereby its members flourish through mutual dependence and the recognition of difference—is explored. Central to this is questioning the analogous use of ‘the body of Christ’ in describing a church

facing decline, which raises the question: when we think of a body, what kind of body are we thinking of? The limits of a body and the extent to which notions of the body—as being preferably young, healthy, and fit—become reified through growth strategies for the ‘successful’ church, are also explored.

The issue raised by this is not that the church should be indifferent to growth (it should be encouraged and welcomed), but that the category of growth has been reduced to a managerial logic detached from its theological moorings. Against this trajectory, this thesis develops an alternative vision of what it might mean to care about growth. Drawing on the resources of disability theology and care ethics, it proposes a reparatory approach to ecclesiology that reframes the conversation about decline and growth in theological rather than economic terms. At the centre of this project lies the claim that a hermeneutic of disability—an interpretive lens that foregrounds vulnerability, dependence, and meaningful limitation—offers both a critical and constructive means of unsettling market-driven logics of growth and proposes reorienting the church towards practices of care. Through this hermeneutic, decline is not dismissed as failure, nor is growth idolised as success. Instead, both are situated within a broader theological framework shaped by embodiment, relationality, and the eschatological conviction that the church’s life is not secured by its own survival strategies but by its participation in the life of God.

The research is situated within two interrelated contexts: the long trajectory of religious change in Britain since the eighteenth century, and the contemporary trend of numerical decline of the Church of England. While patterns of decline are often represented as unprecedented, the history of Christianity in Britain demonstrates that change and transformation are recurring features of religious life. Industrialisation, urbanisation, secularisation, and cultural pluralism have each reshaped patterns of affiliation and practice, and the present moment must therefore be understood in relation to this wider horizon. Yet in recent decades, discourses surrounding decline have become increasingly technocratic, marked by statistical measurement, managerial interventions, and the import of neoliberal vocabularies into ecclesial life. The RR programme is emblematic of this shift,

functioning as a paradigmatic case of ecclesial technologization in which mission is redefined through numerical growth and strategic certainty (typically framed as ‘vision’).

At the same time, the Church of England has faced crises that have eroded institutional legitimacy and revealed deep structural vulnerabilities. Systemic safeguarding failures, the public acknowledgement of racism and exclusion, disputes over sexuality and gender, and the exacerbated fragility produced by the COVID-19 pandemic have each exposed the disjunction between official discourses of compassion and the realities of episcopal governance and care. Within this context, notions of ‘caring about’ are invoked rhetorically while remaining structurally absent. The central research problem, therefore, is how growth and flourishing might be reimagined ecclesologically in a way that resists captivity to market logics, while attending seriously to an ethic of care, in order to articulate a theological intelligibility of church decline and limitation.

Methodologically, this thesis develops a form of critical ecclesiology pursued through comparative political theology. Rather than proposing a singular constructive model, it places rival accounts of the church into sustained theological comparison, asking what forms of embodiment, belonging, and flourishing they presuppose and produce. The discourse of the RR programme is interwoven throughout as a paradigmatic case, enabling an analysis of how ecclesial language and practice are reconfigured through managerial and market-oriented logics. This comparative task is undertaken through a hermeneutic of disability, which functions both critically—exposing the ableist and economistic assumptions embedded within contemporary church growth discourse—and constructively, by reorienting theological judgment toward vulnerability, interdependence, and finitude as constitutive of ecclesial life. In this way, disability does not serve as an additional theme but as an epistemic lens through which the church’s self-understanding is brought into question, enabling a reparative reconfiguration of ecclesial imagination.

Alongside this methodological framework, the thesis draws on interdisciplinary resources from disability studies, phenomenology, liberation theology, and care ethics. Key

interlocutors include Nancy Eiesland, Brian Brock, Deborah Creamer, Amos Yong, Martyn Percy, Nicholas Healy, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Emmanuel Lévinas, Judith Butler, Charles Taylor, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Maurice Hamington, and Joan Tronto. By bringing these perspectives into dialogue, this thesis develops a theological account attentive to vulnerability, relationality, and care, capable of both exposing ecclesiological distortions and gesturing towards more reparative possibilities for the life of the church. It is within this reparative and hopeful register that the thesis turns to disability as a hermeneutic lens.

Throughout the thesis, a hermeneutic of disability operates both as a critical lens and as a constructive theological resource. Critically, when exploring the church, as a body, it begins to expose the ableist assumptions embedded within much of church growth discourse—assumptions that equate flourishing with autonomy, expansion, and productivity, while marginalising ecclesial bodies and communities that resist such norms. Constructively, it offers a theological vision in which vulnerability, precarity, and interdependence are acknowledged as constitutive of both human and ecclesial life. Such a hermeneutic unsettles the binary of ‘managing decline’ versus ‘pursuing growth’. Although seemingly polemic, both options operate within the same framework that treats the church as an organisation to be optimised. A hermeneutic of disability suggests an alternative: one in which decline is not conflated with failure, and growth is not merely equated with success, but both are understood through the church’s vocation to mutual care, hospitality, and fidelity to Christ. In this account, ecclesial flourishing is measured not by expansion but by practices of embodied responsibility and interdependence. The argument unfolds in two main parts, framed throughout by the metaphor of the church as the body of Christ.

The first part provides a historical, sociological, and theological account of decline and growth discourse in the Church of England. It situates contemporary anxieties about decline within the *longue durée* of church decline in Britain since the eighteenth century, and interrogates the meanings attached to numerical measures of vitality in the contemporary church. As such, the Church of England’s RR programme is critically examined as a specific and illustrative instance of the technologisation of ecclesial language

and practice in pursuit of numerical growth. Accordingly, the comparative methodological approach exposes the extent to which texts of the RR programme reveal the import of a new public management (NPM) narrative, which conflates market logic with ecclesial life and reconfigures the church as an apparatus of productivity.

The second part develops a constructive ecclesiology through the hermeneutic of disability. It explores Nancy Eiesland's image of the *disabled God*, situating disability as an epistemic locus for ecclesiology, critiquing growth models that privilege strong and resource-rich churches, advocating instead for practices of interdependence. It then develops a theological framework for finitude and difference, drawing on Deborah Creamer's limits model, Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body, and Charles Taylor's notion of social imaginaries to critique ecclesiologies that deny fragility and to argue that all bodies, human and ecclesial, are marked by limitation. Finally, it advances a reparatory vision of the church through Joan Tronto's ethics of care, proposing the concept of a 'polity of bodily contentment' that reframes ecclesial flourishing around interdependence, presence, and attentiveness, culminating in the claim that the church itself is a disabled body.

Three central findings emerge from this thesis. First is the captivity of contemporary ecclesial discourse to market logics, with the RR programme exemplifying the degree to which neoliberal rationalities have colonised ecclesial language and reconfigured mission and flourishing around measurability and productivity. Second, it rehearses the potential of disability as a hermeneutic for the church. By foregrounding vulnerability and interdependence, a hermeneutic of disability exposes the distortions embedded within church growth discourse and offers an alternative theological account of ecclesial identity in which decline and growth are re-narrated through practices of care. Third, it highlights the constructive role of care ethics for ecclesiology. By engaging Tronto and others, the thesis reframes ecclesial flourishing as relational and embodied, arguing that growth is not a strategy to be achieved but a gift received through the shared practices of a vulnerable body.

The contribution of the thesis lies in its capacity to both diagnose and reimagine what it means to care about growth. It offers a sustained critique of the technocratic turn in the Church of England's discourse on decline and growth, demonstrates the value of disability as a hermeneutic for ecclesiology, integrates disability theology with care ethics to develop a polity of bodily contentment, and situates ecclesial identity within Augustine's distinction between the pilgrim and triumphant church in order to resist the collapse of the eschatological horizon into managerial control.

The thesis concludes with several suggestions for future developments. In particular, the need to grapple with the realities of ageing, death, and ecclesial mortality. This requires asking what 'end-of-life care' might look like for declining congregations, and how ecclesial structures might be reshaped if care, rather than growth, were the organising principle. It also suggests that recognising the church itself as a disabled body opens new possibilities for witness, grounded not in expansion but in fidelity to God's grace. The thesis, therefore, contends that the pressing challenge for the Church of England is not whether it will grow or decline, but whether it can recover its theological horizon. It is proposed that caring *about* growth is not enough; it requires reform through an ethic of care that reframes witness in relation to reclaiming interdependence as the basis for ecclesial flourishing. To recognise the church as the body of Christ—constituted through the giving and receiving care—is to acknowledge that decline need not signify loss, and that growth is not reducible to numerical interests; both can be sites in which the grace of God is disclosed through embodied life together. In this way, the Church of England may yet find renewal, not through optimisation or expansion, but through the grace of becoming a church that takes care seriously.

INTRODUCTION

‘Weighing a pig doesn’t make it grow any faster’.¹
The National Swine Magazine (1919)

The story goes that a boy entering a ‘Pig Club’ contest wanted to win by weighing his pig each week to track its progress and feed it more strategically. His father reminded him that they only had kitchen scales available at home and that weighing alone would not make the pig grow any faster. Despite this, the boy persisted, determined to find a way to measure the gain. Amused by this resolve, the father set a challenge: if the boy could manage to weigh the pig at home, he would provide all its feed for free that summer. The boy succeeded and won the contest by building a balance with a counterweight filled with small stones that could be used to weigh the pig and then be counted in batches on the smaller kitchen scales.

This folklore tale, first published by *The Swine World* in 1919 as the recollection of a talk given to girls and boys at a farming convention in Missouri, has often been reworked and utilised for idiomatic managerial purposes, to emphasise that ‘weighing a pig’ does not itself create growth, but rather that action and creativity in solving problems will lead to the desired results. The boy’s persistence demonstrates curiosity and resourcefulness, while the father’s challenge highlights the difference between monitoring outcomes and actually fostering them. In this way, the story points to the organising insight that genuine innovation often arises when limits are resisted and challenged rather than accepted. Rejecting such limits is the logic of the market.

¹ R. C. Ashby, “Weighing Piggy on a 10-Pound Scale,” *The Swine World: The National Swine Magazine* (Editorial), July 5, 1919, 31, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uiug.30112112112682&seq=1449>.

Decline and the Church of England

The Church of England is in decline; the proverbial pig is losing weight, and something needs to change. There are several ways to respond. First, is to do nothing and accept that decline is inevitable and death imminent, after all, as the writer of Ecclesiastes reminds us, everything has its time and season.² Second is to reverse the decline by looking for ways to grow, seeking methods and strategies that are productive towards reliable returns based on the limited resources available. This second option follows the logic of the market. It rejects the narrative of decline in favour of positive and innovative approaches that engender hope and optimism in what hard work and organising can achieve. The growing church is the church that can overcome limitations and win the fabled contest. Conversely, the first option is seen to be a mode of ‘managing decline’, an institutional ‘giving up’, the idiomatic ‘rearranging the deckchairs on the Titanic’. At first, it seems self-evident that the second option is better. However, this thesis contends that there needs to be a *third way* that makes responses to declining numbers in the church less contentious and more intelligible.

Within contemporary debates about ecclesial sustainability, the polemics of managing decline versus the market-driven imperatives of church growth often appear as the only viable options. The former leans towards bureaucratic retrenchment, closing or amalgamating parish churches, and rationalising resources in a manner that tacitly accepts institutional decline as inevitable. The latter, by contrast, elevates numerical growth and organisational vitality as primary goods, importing into ecclesial life the logics of the market (competition, managerial efficiency, and patterns of consumption). However, developing a theological *third way* capable of resisting polemic trajectories would neither resign itself to fatalistic diminishment nor capitulate to neoliberal growth metrics. Instead, it would reconfigure the criteria of ecclesial flourishing in theological rather than economic terms:

² Ecclesiastes 3.1-8

privileging hospitality, care, and sacramental presence over institutional scale or market share. Such an approach would cultivate resilient forms of witness that are not dependent on expansion for their legitimacy, while at the same time refusing to construe decline as synonymous with failure. By decoupling the imagination of the church's future from both austerity management and growth-maximisation, exploring this third way opens space for an alternative ecclesiological horizon to come into view, one that is eschatological rather than utilitarian, wherein the church is measured not by its capacity to secure survival but by its participation in the sacred act of care. Tracing this third way is what this thesis aims to accomplish.

The concerns that animate this thesis were initially provoked by serving as a church-planter in Vineyard churches UK, where church-planting and church-growth methodologies were inseparable. That world habituated ecclesial life in terms of strategy, positivism, and measurable outcomes. Now, as a priest in the Church of England (CofE), I encounter many of the same managerial and technocratic tendencies reshaping the organising logic of the church. What once appeared distinctive to the Vineyard movement increasingly marks the wider ecclesial landscape of marketisation and the pursuit of growth measured primarily in numerical, strategic, and managerial terms. My perspective is further shaped by proximity to disability and neurodiversity. I am not alone in this experience, as it is notable that many who write about disability from a social, philosophical, political, or theological perspective do so from the experience of living with or caring for someone with a physical, cognitive, or learning difference. In this sense, I am no different. I am dyslexic and face the complexities associated with ADHD on a day-to-day basis. Unsurprisingly, several members of my family are also either dyslexic or diagnosed as high-functioning autistic. Neurodiversity is woven into my life and relationships, and so my theological posture is never neutral towards matters of 'normality'. I write both as a priest in the CofE and as one whose life is marked by the realities of being marginal and different.

It is against this background that I approach the CofE's *Renewal and Reform* (RR) programme as a paradigmatic case of the technologisation of ecclesial language and practice in pursuit of church growth. What is at stake is not only reform but the 'normalisation' of Anglican ecclesiology being reconfigured through the ideals and logic of the market. Whilst the processes by which the church perpetually redefines and renews itself are neither abstract nor timeless, much of the organising logic driving the RR programme appears decoupled from the historic church. As John P. Bradbury observes:

Any theology of the reform and renewal of the church is inherently a theology of change and continuity. It must be a theology of the historical church, and how the church, throughout history, is renewed within the contexts of shifting social, intellectual and institutional realities. This implies that the church is always in a particular concrete historical context, and therefore is always in relationship with the world.³

This change and continuity are the grounding reality of the church, which is never simply an ideal, but always a product of its time and context. This thesis, therefore, examines how the lens of disability unsettles, reorients, and reshapes the ways the church theologically imagines its life and mission as situated in contemporary culture by returning to what it already knows about care.

However, this work of negotiating identity and continuity through time unfolds against a backdrop of institutional fragility. Aside from the current trend of declining attendance and since the inception of this thesis in 2016, the CofE has faced a sequence of significant institutional crises marked by moral failure, theological fracture, and a loss of institutional legitimacy. Key among these were damning revelations from the *Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse* (IICSA) and the *Makin Review* into the John Smyth abuse scandal, both of which exposed a culture in which safeguarding was subordinate to institutional

³ John P. Bradbury, *Perpetually Reforming: A Theology of Church Reform and Renewal* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 32.

reputation.⁴ Archbishop Justin Welby's resignation in 2024, following public pressure and internal failures of accountability, symbolised a broader collapse of confidence in episcopal leadership.

Alongside these failures, the 2021 report of the Archbishops' Anti-Racism Taskforce: *From Lament to Action* acknowledged systemic racism but saw limited structural change. Efforts towards reform were undermined by the absence of any binding accountability, prompting further disillusionment among clergy and laity from ethnic minority backgrounds.⁵ Meanwhile, the Synod's 2023 decision to permit same-sex blessings triggered ruptures both domestically and globally, leading conservative parishes to reject episcopal authority and the Global South Fellowship of Anglican churches (GSFA) to declare a break in communion.⁶ Further to all this, the COVID-19 pandemic intensified existing fragility, accelerating a decline in attendance, financial sustainability, and public relevance. In terms of safeguarding, racial justice, and inclusion, the CofE has exhibited a pattern of discursive care, commissioning reports, yet becoming detached from accountable practice. In recent years, appeals towards compassion and flourishing have too often masked institutional inertia, leaving those most harmed by its failures without redress.

These interwoven crises expose a profound tension between the heuristic of the church as a community of care and the institutional realities that hinder any hope of arresting further numerical decline. Consequently, the language of care—often invoked through notions of 'flourishing'—has functioned more as a moral veneer than an operational ethic.

⁴ "‘Prolific, brutal and horrific’: Makin report calls out the Smyth abuse and the cover-up," Church Times, updated 8 November, 2024, accessed August 15, 2025, <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2024/8-november/news/uk/prolific-brutal-and-horrific-makin-report-calls-out-the-smyth-abuse-and-the-cover-up>.

⁵ Jim McConalogue, Rachel Neal, and Jack Harris, *Rotting from the Head: Radical Progressive Activism and the Church of England*, Civitas (London, June 2021), 5–7.

⁶ GSFA Primates, "Ash Wednesday Statement of GSFA Primates on the Church of England's Decision Regarding the Blessing of Same Sex Unions," news release, 20 February, 2023, <https://www.thegsfa.org/news/ash-wednesday-statement-of-gsfa-primates-on-the-church-of-englands-decision-regarding-the-blessing-of-same-sex-unions>.

As such, the relationship between care and ecclesiology will be explored throughout this thesis, questioning the current trends guiding much of the organising logic of responses to declining attendance. Most urgent within this enquiry is whether the church, as the body of Christ, is more in need of care than it currently comprehends. If the answer to this is ‘yes’, then we need to reassess the extent to which the Church of England cares about growth rather than perpetuating what Marcus Moberg highlights in the rise of discourse driven by a new public management (NPM) narrative. Terms such as ‘strategic planning’, ‘flexibility’, ‘performance goals’, and ‘viability’ become appropriated from the private to the public sector, resulting in organisations and institutions such as the church developing a ‘new emphasis on strategic planning and an increasing preoccupation with the generation of new strategic initiatives.’⁷ This contrast poses a deeper theological question: whether the church, in seeking its own survival through technocratic strategies, obscures the very reality of the body of Christ, whose integrity rests not in market imperatives but in the mutual care and dependence of its members.

Epistemologically, this reveals how easily institutional self-preservation begins to distort what growth really means (or can mean) for the flourishing church. From an ecclesiological perspective, the rise of NPM discourse exposes a church unable to narrate its life apart from the logics of power and survival. Attending to such disjunctions suggests that the search for renewal may require starting from places the church has too often overlooked—the margins where fragility, dependence, and otherness are most acutely felt. It is to these sites of experience, particularly the lived realities of disability, that this thesis will explore to ask how the Church of England might learn to speak differently.

A hermeneutic of disability is employed in this thesis as an interpretive lens through which to read and critique the Church of England’s growth-oriented strategies. By

⁷ Marcus Moberg, *Church, Market, and Media: A Discursive Approach to Institutional Religious Change* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 50.

foregrounding vulnerability, limitation, and interdependence, it reveals how all human and ecclesial bodies can become distorted when flourishing is measured solely by productivity and numerical success. By viewing the church through the lens of disability, the extent to which contemporary institutional interests and concerns align with cultural interests, rather than theological convictions, can be better understood. In this way, a hermeneutic of disability holds the potential to renew and reform current trends in ecclesiology, offering an alternative vision of growth grounded in justice, inclusion, and communal flourishing, rather than privileging market-driven logics in search of survival. Accordingly, as Amos Yong suggests, an ‘ecclesial theology of disability cannot be concerned with mere description but is always motivated by how the church’s understanding, beliefs, and confessions can and must shape her practices.’⁸

Yong’s insistence that theology must move beyond description to the re-formation of ecclesial belief and practice anticipates the methodology of this thesis outlined in the next chapter—explicitly framed as an exercise in comparative political theology—in which the task is not merely to analyse renewal discourse from a critical distance, but to ask whether and how such discourse responsibly participates in shaping the church’s theological self-understanding, public imagination, and embodied life. Consequently, this performative theology anticipates that through a hermeneutic of disability, marginalising categories of ability, normalcy, and wholeness become unsettled. This perspective is particularly significant when set against the Church of England’s current discourse on growth and decline. A hermeneutic of disability, therefore, challenges ableist assumptions in interpretations of Scripture, doctrine, and liturgical practice, while also broadening an ecclesiological horizon of embodiment, identity, and belonging.

⁸ Amos Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome: Reimagining Disability in Late Modernity* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2007), 14.

The language used to describe disability has undergone significant transformation over recent decades, reflecting broader cultural shifts in how impairment, difference, and embodiment are understood. Terms such as ‘handicap’, ‘spastic’, ‘backwards’, and ‘retarded’, once widely used in medical, academic, and colloquial contexts, have become recognised as pejorative and dehumanising. These terms not only carry a legacy of institutional and social exclusion (and control) but also participate in discursive practices that stigmatise and diminish those they purport to describe. As Sharon V. Betcher critiques, these tropes of disablement that equally become embedded within religious discourse by presuming to ‘act as voice of the voiceless’, which, despite being framed as justice, reinscribe silence by presuming the incapacity of the other to speak.⁹ The problem she highlights is less a humanitarian concern but rather the ‘exclusion by attitudes and architecture, by economics and science—that divert discursive negotiation into mere rescue tactics.’¹⁰ It would seem that the power to name raises deeper questions about dignity, autonomy, and self-definition. Importantly, even well-intentioned clinical or categorical labels risk framing individuals primarily through their impairments, thus reinforcing reductive or medicalised accounts of human difference. Key to overcoming these diminutions is the idea of a person-first terminology (e.g. ‘a person who has Down’s syndrome’, rather than ‘a Down’s syndrome person’). Recognising the ethical and theological significance of this linguistic instability, Brian Brock proposes a more capacious and generous mode of reference, favouring the phrase ‘those labeled disabled’.¹¹ This formulation not only foregrounds the socially constructed nature of disability but also resists the tendency to collapse the person into the label. It gestures towards a theological ethics attentive to the contingency and complexity of embodied life, holding space for people to exceed the terms imposed upon them. As

⁹ Sharon V. Betcher, *Spirit and the Politics of Disablement* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 7.

¹⁰ Betcher, *Spirit and the Politics of Disablement*, 7.

¹¹ Brian Brock, *Wondrously Wounded: Theology, Disability, and the Body of Christ* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2019), 8.

such, this thesis adopts Brock's approach, not as a terminological solution, but as an ongoing commitment to speak of disability in ways that resist fixity, honour difference, and attend to the dignity of those so described.

Thesis overview

This thesis takes shape in two parts, framed throughout by the metaphor of the church as the body of Christ. The first part gives a constructive account of the historical, sociological, and theological dimensions of numerical decline in the Church of England, establishing the conceptual foundation for this thesis that seeks a new way to approach growth in the church. By first tracing the historical and contemporary narrative of decline—interrogating the epistemic and ethical assumptions underpinning growth discourse—this thesis then seeks to articulate a reparatory view of what it means to *care about* growth. As such, the second part shifts church growth discourse away from the logic of the market—underpinning much of contemporary church growth strategy and responses to numerical decline—towards the possibilities of an ecclesiology shaped more distinctly by care ethics. I pursue this move through a hermeneutic of disability as a means to critique growth-focused ecclesiologies. In doing so, I argue for a more comprehensive reception of care ethics as an alternative organising logic for the church, which opens possibilities for future developments in the ecclesiology of disability.

To begin, chapter one situates contemporary concerns about falling attendance in the CofE within a *longue durée* perspective—emphasising the effects of long-term transformations in society, culture, economy, and religious affiliations—highlighting that anxieties over church decline are nothing new. Since the eighteenth century, industrialisation, urbanisation, political liberalism, and the rise of dissenting traditions have all contributed towards the shaping of cultural and personal associations with the church. During the late twentieth century, the influences became increasingly technocratic, with

statistical measures and managerial strategies increasingly framing church vitality through positivist language and the logic of the market. Accordingly, the first chapter interrogates the meanings attributed to decline, emphasising that numbers alone cannot capture the complex, lived realities of belief, belonging, and the church as the body of Christ. Methodologically, this interrogation proceeds through a comparative political-theological analysis of rival accounts of the church as the body of Christ, developed as an elaboration of Nancy Eiesland's symbolic linkage between the church and the disabled body. Building on this methodological insight, managerial and growth-oriented visions are placed in sustained dialogue with a disability-informed, Pauline account of ecclesial embodiment. In doing so, growth is subjected to theological judgment according to the form of embodiment it presupposes and privileges. The chapter continues by tracing the church's responses to perceived decline, with an extended critique of the *Renewal and Reform* (RR) programme throughout the remainder of the thesis, which exemplifies the new organising logic guiding contemporary decisions of the Church of England at a national level. The ensuing growth initiatives that have come from the RR programme (since its inception in 2015) increasingly adopt managerial and market-oriented logics, prioritising numerical growth as a proxy for success. While being well-intended with the hope of sustaining the church and serving the common good, these strategies ultimately risk making growth an end in itself, privileging productivity, youthfulness, and visibility over relationality, interdependence, and theological depth.

Chapter two develops this argument through sustained attention to the discursive and epistemic dimensions of the contemporary church-growth agenda. Proceeding within the comparative political-theological framework established in Chapter One, it reads the *Renewal and Reform* programme through a disability hermeneutic, placing its managerial and growth-oriented construal of the church in dialogue with a Pauline account of the body of Christ marked by vulnerability and interdependence. Through this lens, the chapter

examines how ‘mission’ becomes increasingly aligned with measurable expansion, and how growth is repositioned from one possible sign of vitality to a governing criterion of legitimacy within the life of the church at both national and local levels. It demonstrates how such framings shape perception and practice, potentially reconfiguring the church from a sacramental communion into a system oriented toward optimisation and productivity, while also exposing the theological anthropology implicit in these frameworks: when the church is interpreted through the logic of efficiency and output, human and ecclesial bodies alike risk becoming objects of management and control. Attention is therefore given to the disruptive potential of bodies and lives that resist normative assumptions of agency and productivity, particularly those marked by disability or marginality. Drawing on the work of Hans Reinders, Martin Buber, James Nelson, Brian Brock, and others, the chapter develops a theological account attentive to vulnerability, relationality, and care—one that challenges utilitarian and market-driven logics, emphasises interdependence and the intrinsic worth of all members of the body of Christ, and situates disability within the broader context of neo-liberal values of contributive worth, normativity, and calculable outcomes.

The second half of the thesis then pivots around Nancy Eiseland’s conception of *the disabled God* as a site of theological knowledge. Contesting accounts of disability as a deficit, chapter three explores how disability, despite often being marginal, is an epistemic locus from which to begin a reparatory approach to ecclesiology. Drawing on disability theology, liberation theology, and Nicholas Healy’s practical-prophetic ecclesiology, this chapter then critiques growth-oriented models that privilege structurally advantaged churches while marginalising others. Given the extent to which the Church of England’s RR programme exemplifies the implicit market-driven assumptions shaping much of the contemporary church growth strategies—whereby numerical growth and vitality are equated with flourishing—Martyn Percy’s notion of ‘implicit theology’ is then employed to show how

ecclesial identity is enacted through practice and performance, rather than being made explicit by formal statements, Synodical literature, and strategy documents. In essence, what is said is not always what is meant or enacted. By attending to vulnerability, relationality, and interdependence, rather than strength and productivity, the church can recover insight into its vocation beyond numerical growth. Chapter three concludes by drawing on Eiesland and Judith Butler, demonstrating how welcoming difference in all its forms of precarity and dependence can become generative for developing an ecclesiology of disability capable of restoring the theological significance of embodiment, mutuality, and modalities of care.

Chapter four then develops a constructive framework for understanding limitation and difference. Building on Deborah Creamer's 'limits model' and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, it frames bodily limitation as universal and inherent, challenging ideals of ecclesial perfection and efficiency. Using Docetism as an analogy, it critiques disembodied ecclesiologies that obscure vulnerability, loss, and relational dependency. By integrating Charles Taylor's social imaginaries with the ethical thought of Lévinas and Butler, the chapter shows how contemporary growth paradigms marginalise difference and equate success with expansion. A hermeneutic of disability is then explored to restore relationality and ethical attentiveness as central to ecclesiology. This reveals that true ecclesial flourishing emerges not from conformity to growth metrics but through a sustained engagement with difference and interdependence.

Finally, chapter five begins tracing a vision of the church grounded in care and interdependence. In what I term the 'polity of bodily contentment', ecclesial flourishing is thus reframed in terms of relational trust, presence, and mutual responsibility, countering the market-driven logic of growth. The chapter engages most significantly with Joan Tronto's four-phase care framework—*caring about*, *taking care of*, *care-giving*, and *care-receiving*—which offers a critical lens for analysing these dynamics. The final section of this

chapter then advances the claim that the church itself, as the body of Christ, is a disabled body. Authentic ecclesial life is realised not through self-sufficiency or numerical growth, but through vulnerability, interdependence, and attentiveness to others. God's presence is revealed in limited and wounded bodies, and the church's vocation is to both accept and dwell within these limitations, nurture interdependence, and practise care as a reality of the local, grounded church. In this vision, the church is prophetic and attentive, embodying relational and ethical life rather than reaching for abstract ideals of the perfect body. This is a church that does not just care about growth, but one that grasps care as the central mode of faithfulness to Christ. This is the body that this thesis seeks to explore.

PART I

Contested Bodies: *Decline and the Logic of Growth*

CHAPTER 1.

The problem of growth: *Church and the market*

Death by numbers: *Measuring the decline of the Church of England*

When you can measure what you are speaking about, and express it in numbers, you know something about it; but when you cannot measure it, when you cannot express it in numbers, your knowledge is of a meagre and unsatisfactory kind: it may be the beginning of knowledge, but you have scarcely, in your thoughts, advanced to the stage of *science*, whatever the matter may be.¹²

Lord Kelvin, 1883

Introduction

In recent decades, the impulse to diagnose declining church attendance and prescribe countermeasures for growth has echoed much of the same logic as Lord Kelvin, that what is measurable is meaningful, and what is not is of lesser value. However, in the life of the church, what truly matters often defies this sort of simple assessment. Particularly as reducing church life to what can be measured risks obscuring the complex, lived realities of faith, belonging, and what it means to be the body of Christ. Yet this narrative of church decline in Britain is nothing new.

Despite cultural folklore and book titles to the contrary, there has never been a so-called ‘golden age’ for the growing church. The story of church decline in Britain is often told as if it were a recent emergency, the product of late-twentieth-century cultural upheavals and an increasingly secular public square. Yet, as this chapter will show, anxieties about waning influence, falling attendance, and the erosion of social bonds have been in circulation for centuries. Since the eighteenth century, the Church of England has navigated a shifting landscape in which industrialisation, urbanisation, political liberalism,

¹² Lord Kelvin, *Popular Lectures and Addresses*, vol. 1 (1889) ‘Electrical Units of Measurement’, delivered 3 May 1883.

and the rise of dissenting traditions steadily eroded the parish church's once-unquestioned authority. By the Victorian era, this lament for decline had already become a familiar refrain—rooted as much in the loss of a paternalist social order as in any collapse of personal faith.

At the heart of the problem lies not simply the measurement of decline, but the meaning attributed to it. From the statistical dashboards of Clive Field to the growth-recipe metaphors of the Church of England's *Church Growth Research Programme*, numerical data has been used to diagnose the health of the church and prescribe remedies. Yet, as the following chapter will demonstrate, such numbers rarely follow a straight path: they are interpreted through social, political, and ecclesiological lenses that both reveal and distort the narrative of flourishing in the Church of England. Historical patterns suggest that decline is neither linear nor uniform; the narrative depends on what is measured, how it is counted, and whose experience is taken as normative. Yet, as will be explored in this section, the present reality of the established church in England and Wales continues to witness a decline in Sunday attendance whilst retaining a particular privilege within British society.

Bishops in the Church of England continue to exercise moral influence over public life through the House of Lords, weighing in on debates ranging from social care to immigration, from poverty to education, and from housing to healthcare. Alongside this national influence, the Church of England and the church of Scotland also continue to exert varying forms of influence at a grassroots level, through churches that play a role in the civic life of parishioners, whether they attend or not. But as with all forms of public engagement and institutional privilege, this is becoming ever fraught with tension. As contemporary British society becomes increasingly secular, the influence of religious institutions, particularly the Church of England (CofE), faces growing scrutiny. Questions of the continued relevance of the church in a multicultural and pluralistic society have become more pronounced in recent years, with historical privileges and influence becoming

increasingly incongruent with the realities of modern Britain. Yet, as the CofE navigates the contemporary challenges posed by a rapidly changing cultural and societal landscape, it would seem there is nothing new in this dynamic.

As such, this chapter traces the interplay between historical context, sociological analysis, and theological interpretation in order to ask whether the CofE's prevailing narrative of decline—shaped by secularisation theory, market-driven growth models, and demographic targeting—risks obscuring the deeper questions of authenticity, common life, and shared meaning that have long defined its place in English society. By placing contemporary statistical analysis alongside the *longue durée* of Anglican history, it invites a more nuanced reading of decline: not simply as loss, but as part of a longer and more complex reconfiguration of religious life in Britain.

Tracing declining attendance

Since the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the rise of sectarian churches, combined with the new reach of Secularism, has challenged the institutional authority of the CofE, with dissenters of the burgeoning Protestant churches considered an ever-greater threat due to their growing numbers. Callum Brown observes that as British society began moving away from agrarian existence towards the thrust and parry of the Industrial Revolution, the church soon found itself in the crucible of a rapidly changing social landscape. By the late eighteenth century, the prevailing commentary propagated a thesis of Christianity as being a 'religion in decline'.¹³ Brown highlights two groups in particular who, together, sought to retain control of this evolving narrative. The first, unsurprisingly, were the parsons, ministers, priests and preachers concerned about losing power and the perceived deleterious effects of the dissenting church. He observes:

¹³ Callum G. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation 1800–2000*, 2nd ed. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), 16.

Clergy of the established or state churches—the Church of England and the church of Scotland—have had at the forefront of their minds the danger to their churches posed by the rise of alternative or dissenting churches. Pessimism about faith has for this group been closely related to a fear of loss of power.¹⁴

The second concerned group was the establishment, comprised of political and social elites, who attempted to uphold the status quo of church influence, as their power was equally enmeshed with its reach in civic life. Together, both the parish church and manor house symbolised a local authority, whereby weekly worship continually reinforced the established social hierarchy and class structure. Landed elites saw threats to church authority as being coterminous with their own. Accordingly, the decline in church attendance reflected a potential loss of control (or obedience) for both church and landowner alike.

However, by the mid to late eighteenth century, the course of disintegration for this power structure was set, and the inevitable erosion of social and economic capital formerly binding people to parish and land to landowner was taking effect. Combined with the new wealth generation of industrialised production and the shifting social attitudes towards religious belief, social ties began weakening across the ever-widening spectrum of beliefs (or unbelief) as viable alternatives to the Christian faith emerged. However, as Charles Taylor notes, these particular forms of secular thought and unbelief were typically reserved for the intelligentsia rather than for the common worker or farm hand through what he calls ‘the nova effect’, a rapid change from a single, shared religious framework to a plurality of perspectives.¹⁵ Regardless, country homes became retreats rather than places of permanent residence, and, in time, the lord’s parish pew became less frequently occupied on a Sunday. The reality of church decline in Britain during the late eighteenth-century was thus a convergence of dissolving social bonds, urban expansion, and the rise of modern

¹⁴ Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain*, 16.

¹⁵ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2007), 423.

secularisation, all brought on by the mechanising effects of industrialisation. In short, it seems that despite the contemporary narration of what falling numbers and shifting societal attitudes towards religion might mean, the lament for church decline in Britain is nothing new. As Andrew Brown and Linda Woodhead also highlight, rather than a loss of religious fervour, it had much more to do with the decline of paternalism and the rising effects of liberalism that were shaping new patterns of everyday life throughout the late-Modern era:

Religious people often think that churches decline because people stop believing in God, but in fact belief ceases to seem credible when people no longer act on it. Rituals and routine practices construct their own meanings. It is the unspoken and inarticulable parts of religion which give it strength.¹⁶

From a societal perspective, the unspoken and habitual meaning-making of shared experiences is what creates social cohesion. Through its worship, Woodhead and Brown contend, the CofE was once privileged to be one such benefactor of these societal rituals and routines as recently as the late 20th century. This type of institutional influence mirrors Bourdieu's *habitus*, where socially and culturally defined groups embed shared practices into daily life, turning them into habits that strengthen social bonds.¹⁷

In much the same way that people in common would have expected to know and be known by their local doctor or milkman, the parish priest was thus someone who certainly knew (and was known by) their community, whether they attended the local parish church or not. As such, the local parson was a person of influence, a known entity. In ecclesiological terms, this distinguished the polity of the CofE as being *societal* rather than *congregational*, distinguishing a church that draws its identity from the ordinary lives and culture of the local people from one that is characterised by an intentional separation from society (sectarianism) that seeks to intensify membership and build a faithful community of 'the saved' (those who are 'in' and those who are 'out'). As Woodhead and Brown highlight,

¹⁶ Linda Woodhead and Andrew Brown, *That Was The Church That Was: How the Church of England Lost the English People* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 65.

¹⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (London: Routledge, 2010), 168.

the challenge this shift poses to the CofE as it decouples from the common practices of everyday people is that the ‘more “religious” belief comes to be something distinct and separate from the normal beliefs and practices of the society around it, the more vulnerable it becomes’.¹⁸ This same vulnerability is what seems to drive the current forms of anxiety (or, at worst, panic) about decline within the CofE.

The peak in church attendance seen during the height of the Victorian era was founded on the intelligibility of a faith that comprehended and articulated meaning that had traction in the everyday lives of real people living a shared existence. The significance of this commonality was that it acted as a social glue in the most challenging of times. As Woodhead and Brown note: ‘[A]t its strongest, the Church of England had been able to celebrate and comfort the English people (or at least those who didn’t prefer to be ‘non-conformist’) in their deepest joys and sorrows, both individually and collectively.’¹⁹

Despite the positive aspects of this pastoral enmeshing, it would eventually become its undoing. Bishops were entangled within English culture as part of the ruling class and hierarchies—based on class, gender, and duty—that would soon begin dissolving under modern pressures. Hence, the acceleration of decline was less a change in religious belief but the result of a failure to adapt and evolve alongside society. Rather than embrace the changing social fabric, the CofE grew increasingly insular, clinging to clerical divisions and outdated practices. Attending to this failure has clear implications for contemporary responses to declining attendance. Yet, instead of fostering unity or relevancy, a new form of clericalism, one that feared the societal shifts of the late 1970s and early 1980s, gave way to ritualistic formalities and factionalism, eventually causing the Church of England to lose sight of its need for a meaningful connection within contemporary society.

¹⁸ Woodhead and Brown, *That Was The Church That Was*, 65.

¹⁹ Woodhead and Brown, *That Was The Church That Was*, 69.

As the new millennium began dawning, the result was a church disconnected from the people it once reflected, unable to maintain its position within the turbulence of social transformation. However, this has led to polarising accounts of church decline and Christianity in Britain that Jane Garnett (et al.) point out ‘tend to associate change with crisis and to define Christians only as those people they can count’.²⁰ Counting is undeniably key to any assessment of decline (or growth), and to this end, it is helpful to turn our attention towards the data, examining the specific trends and factors contributing to the contemporary assessment of decline, whilst seeking a more nuanced understanding of how societal shifts and ecclesiological convictions might intersect.

(Mis)reading decline

A significant contribution within the field of research surrounding the church and data analysis is the multi-volume publication *Counting Religion in Britain, 1970–2020*, by Clive Field, which explores the extent and nature of religious change in Britain over the past fifty years. Using quantitative data and a comprehensive approach to measure the personal nature of religious belonging, behaviour, and belief, Field offers a nuanced reading of religious decline in Britain that reaffirms secularisation as the prevailing social trend in the church since the 1970s. Seeking to overcome the simplistic view of secularisation as merely a by-product of modernisation, Field’s methodology identifies twenty-one key performance indicators (KPIs) that he uses to assess data trends. By reading the portfolio of these performance indicators through what he terms a ‘secularization dashboard’, Field identifies decline as being the byproduct of an extensive reduction in the religious socialisation of children and adolescents, with declining Sunday attendance identified as the direct result of

²⁰ Jane Garnett et al., eds., *Redefining Christian Britain: Post-1945 Perspectives* (London: SCM Press, 2006), 289.

secularising forces (rather than a simple loss of belief). Under the performance indicator ‘Observed Religious Service Attendance’, Field observes:

The overall picture of absolute decline is confirmed by the regular counts of attenders made by some of the mainstream denominations: in the Church of England, for instance, there was a 55 per cent reduction between 1970 and 2019; in the Methodist church, one of 62 per cent between 1972 and 2017; and in the Roman Catholic Church of England and Wales, one of 64 per cent between 1970 and 2019 (relatively, from 47 per cent to 20 per cent of the Catholic population). Of course, the number of persons present during a single week does not embrace the totality of worshippers, given the move from weekly to less frequent (but still allegedly ‘regular’) attendance. However, a majority of Britons are unchurched and have been so for a very long time.²¹

The contention of this thesis is not that declining church attendance within Britain is in dispute, but rather the issue of clarifying why the decline is occurring in the first place. Making sense of the factors contributing to decline is essential to determining what might be the most appropriate response. If the decline seen since the 1960s is framed within a loss of ‘market share’, then any appeals made to consumer interest would seem intelligible: less a case of managing the symptoms and more a case of treating the cause. However, what remains distinctive and measurable for those assessing declining church attendance remains contentious. As Lyndon Shakespeare notes:

The factors of decline notwithstanding, there remain disagreements as to the degree of the decline in mainline churches. The counter argument states that while the data used to measure the decline is accurate, it does not tell the full story. In other words, the analysis is missing essential elements not taken into account when calculating the data.²²

Highlighting the work of sociologists Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, Shakespeare identifies how their analysis of census data relating to Christian belief and practice in the United States reveals that, rather than facing decline, religious adherence in mainline churches actually increased from the late-eighteenth century until the new millennium. Finke and Starke, Shakespeare notes, saw decline as the narration of religious attitudes rather than the percentages of those claiming specific membership or affiliation. However,

²¹ Clive D. Field, *Counting Religion in Britain, 1970–2020: Secularization in Statistical Context*, First ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 280.

²² Lyndon Shakespeare, *Being the Body of Christ in the Age of Management* (Oregon: Cascade Books, 2016), 21.

their use of statistical data did not reveal or take into account the shifting measurement of what was being recorded as a sign of congregational membership. Instead, it analysed the data with far fewer parameters determining church affiliation (or attendance). According to their analysis, the church in America was growing because the goalposts of belonging were widened. In effect, they reframed the social ties of church attendance from ‘thick’ to ‘thin’ and, by so doing, skewed the data set. It would seem that how the numbers are read really does matter.

Further to this, Field also contends that in Britain, any optimism towards a broader narrative of church growth is also unrealistic at the present time. In particular, he highlights the work of David Goodhew—who has been at the academic forefront of recent attention towards church growth in the UK—as misreading the empirical evidence. As he observes:

David Goodhew has been right to draw attention to the existence of some pockets of church growth during recent decades but wrong to interpret these as a springboard for general desecularization or resacralization; these gains, often made laterally at the expense of other places of worship, nowhere near offset the losses that are still being sustained overall, so the net national picture remains one of shrinkage.²³

Thus, counter-narratives of decline—those which emphasise selective instances of church growth as evidence of a more favourable trajectory—must be understood as contingent upon, and ultimately constrained by, the epistemological frameworks and methodological presuppositions through which ecclesial decline is quantified and interpreted. It is these frameworks—shaped by particular historiographical traditions, disciplinary biases, and institutional priorities—that determine not only what is measured, but also how the resulting data is read, narrated, and mobilised within broader debates about the future of the Church of England and interpretations of decline.

²³ Field, *Counting Religion in Britain, 1970–2020*, 298.

The poetry of data and decline

What seems to be critical here is the extent to which statistics (and their resulting interpretation) are understood with an awareness of how any of the underlying theological, ecclesiological, and sociological presuppositions play an influential role in the subsequent 'story'. In this sense, the data invites a reading not unlike that required by poetry. To dissect without attending to cadence, image, and aporia is to risk mistaking anatomy for meaning. So too with ecclesial statistics: when their aesthetic and affective dimensions are ignored (when decline is treated as a deficit, or growth as self-evident good), their significance is diminished. The question, then, is not only what the numbers show, but *how* they are read, and who gets to name the metrics of 'growth' or 'decline' in the church.

In this light, the decline of church attendance in Britain is more than a demographic shift; it is a verse in the longer poem of cultural change. And as with all poetry, its meaning is not just in what is lost but in what remains (and what may yet be written). As Percy observes, within the sociology of religion, the interpretation of statistics is never entirely without bias, and accordingly, the reading brought to bear on the data of church decline is particularly susceptible to reframing the social reality that, in turn, shapes (or propagates) a particular narrative. As he states:

The 'story' that statistics might tell about church decline or growth, or perhaps the rise and fall in the number of baptisms or confirmations, is a field often rich with conjecture, conclusion and counter-argument. The problem, simply stated, is that any reliability attributed to the data can often clash directly with the perceived ecclesial situation, religious imagination or doctrine outlook.²⁴

Based on this understanding, it would not be unreasonable to surmise that tensions arising from interpreting empirical data and the perceived reality are inevitable within the narrative and discourse of church growth and decline.

²⁴ Martyn Percy, *Shaping the Church: The Promise of Implicit Theology* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 35.

Percy highlights this tension most clearly through the case study of an Anglican deanery review he chaired, during which the clergy were consulted on their perspective and outlook for their churches and parish ministry. Almost all described their situation as being upbeat, with signs of growth and potential on the horizon. Yet the statistics for seasonal attendance (specifically Easter) alongside other parish data such as Electoral Roll and other ministerial data (including baptisms and confirmations) showed an almost uniform decline. The statistics were seemingly clear, yet the clergy told a different story. At a surface level, one explanation for this discord could be that the clergy were either disingenuous, over-optimistic, or lost in some sort of self-deceptive determinism, burying their heads in the sand (so to speak). Percy concludes this was not the case. Instead, he surmises their narrative was grounded in anecdotes rather than recorded data or commissioned research.²⁵ A closer reading of the data showed that annual ‘popular piety’ had simply moved from the Easter to the Christmas service, whilst the merging or closing of parish churches and a change in balance from child to adult confirmations all told a different story through shifting data sets and importance placed on statistical variables. This is not to suggest an unfair reading of the data, but that *what* was measured and *how* it was narrated—within the complexities of the context and moment—significantly affected whether a trend of decline or signs of growth became the apparent narrative. Percy notes that the numbers and the narrative need not be in conflict. Instead, he suggests the hard data narrating national decline could be used as a counterbalance to the localised narratives of growth, to more intentionally focus efforts towards the flourishing of both parish church and deanery. According to Percy, the tension between these two stories thus became the locus of potential (growth) for the deanery rather than an entrenched conflict between empirical evidence and pastoral ministry.

²⁵ Percy, *Shaping the Church*, 36.

This same tension found in selective storytelling can also be seen in the broader religious landscape of post-war Britain. As Linda Woodhead and Rebecca Catto highlight, the key challenge in examining post-war British religion lies not in the ability to analyse the data but in the temporal proximity and scope of religious changes, making it challenging to gain a comprehensive perspective.²⁶ Woodhead and Catto note the extent to which changes in habitual worship and religious adherence since the 1960s have typically been framed through the ‘secularisation’ theory that suggests as societies modernise, religious significance diminishes both privately and publicly—a trend most notably seen in Britain since the post-war era. More recently, however, as Woodhead and Catto observe, a ‘desecularisation’ theory has also emerged, contending that the predictions of secularisation were premature, and that religion has instead experienced a public revival and return to societal influence. However, Woodhead and Catto resist endorsing either one of these perspectives as a trend or the new status quo, contending that the analysis of statistics need not require a binary outcome but can remain ambiguous, resulting in a plausible conclusion of ‘both and’ or ‘neither’ that magnanimously sustains opposing perspectives. As such, there could be a secular and religious post-war Britain as much as there could be a growing and declining church. At first, this may seem an axiomatic approach, but as they surmise:

This only seems puzzling if existing frameworks are retained, because they assume not only that ‘religion’ and ‘secularity’ are clear and distinct entities, but that they are elements in a zerosum equation, such that modern history can only be told as a simple evolutionary tale: either from the religious to the secular, or from the secular to the religious.²⁷

In much the same way that Percy highlights above, growth and decline in the parish are not necessarily constrained to a reductive narrative—the declining church need not be the singular story. If this is true, the implications for the intelligibility of growth programmes in the Church of England necessitate a far closer reading of the statistics and

²⁶ Linda Woodhead and Rebecca Catto, *Religion and Change in Modern Britain* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012).

²⁷ Linda Woodhead, “Introduction,” in *Religion and Change in Modern Britain*, ed. Linda Woodhead and Rebecca Catto (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), 3.

context of measurement. To date, contemporary descriptions of church statistics (whether hopeful or pessimistic) and the funding formulas of the Church of England follow a monolithic presupposition of a decline in attendance that is distinctly shaped by the extensive reach of secularisation. As Woodhead identifies: ‘Secularization is now so established that it has shaped the entire field: how agendas are set, research questions asked, survey questions framed, data collected and analysed. Even theories of desecularization are framed in its image.’²⁸

The extent to which generalisations about the rise of secularisation are considered a corollary to the decline of religion has also significantly shaped the common assumption of decline being traced to a former point in time when churches were packed with worshipping congregations. Tracing this rhetoric from the early-nineteenth century through to the post-war cultures of Britain, France, and the United States during the 1960s, Taylor notes:

[Y]ou can question whether religion has really receded in our era as much as appears; or while accepting that it doesn’t occupy all that much space, you can wonder whether it ever did. You can question, in other words, our images of a past golden age of religion, an “age of faith”; perhaps things are after all not that different, beneath a changed exterior. Both these claims turn on questions of interpretation.²⁹

This question of interpretation resurfaces for parishes in the Church of England every October. On an annual basis, parish administrators, churchwardens, PCCs, and priests are required to submit their ‘Parish Returns’ via an online system to record their year-on-year statistics of mission (average weekly attendance, numbers of baptisms, marriages, and funerals), financial accounts, and an ‘energy footprint’. Gathering this data is beneficial to the parish and diocese in many ways; directing attention and discerning needs for the intentional flourishing of the church should be encouraged. Yet the process of recording and the metrics used for what is commonly called the ‘October count’ seem remote from the grounded reality and challenges of day-to-day parish ministry. The data fields for entry

²⁸ Woodhead, “Introduction,” 3.

²⁹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 427.

(what is being counted) serve more as a means of disconnect (and disappointment) between the local and the central governance of the church, rather than the intended focus on growth. Given that the implicit interpretation of these statistics follows a market model of growth, the Parish Return can, all too easily and unintentionally, become the measurement of either the successful or failing church. Parish clergy can often feel as though they fall foul of the latter. In much the same way that Percy highlights the discrepancy between recorded data and the grounded experience of the clergy, the question this raises is whether the interpretation of the data is an authentic reading of the parish context.

Driving this dynamic is the working principle that programmes of growth can intentionally overcome decline by creating an environment where individuals feel empowered to express their 'true selves' (and thereby find faith in Jesus). This includes fostering diverse forms of worship, tailoring messages to resonate with personal experiences, and promoting community involvement that aligns with individual passions and gifts. A prime example of this is the *Fresh Expressions* movement that has generated many New Worshiping Communities (NWCs) within the Church of England by engaging with specific cultural contexts and demographic groups, such as 'Mosaic church' (Leeds) for young professionals, 'Sorted' (Bradford) for youth and young families, and 'Forest church' which appeals to those drawn to spirituality through nature. These initiatives each reflect the broader strategy to address church decline by fostering new communities of faith based on specific interest groups. However, the way in which data on numerical decline is interpreted to drive growth-focused programmes then raises concerns about how this response subsequently reshapes the ecclesial horizon. Furthermore, the integration of market-driven logic profoundly misreads the extent to which the pressures of individualism are forming and altering the conditions of belief through what Taylor calls the ethic of 'authenticity' that seeks self-expression and meaning outside of inherited religious structures.

Contemporary missional trends within the CofE seek to engage people where they are for good reasons, yet they align with Taylor's observation that modern individuals actively resist imposed traditions in favour of those communities that resonate with their personal sense of identity and fulfilment. In this way, the church is reduced to a service provider or product choice amongst many and should pose a challenge to any church initiative seeking to address the decline in the contemporary church. The pursuit of authenticity within ecclesial life seems key. If the drive for innovation prioritises individual spiritual preferences over a shared theological and sacramental framework, it may risk inadvertently contributing to the fragmentation of the church rather than to its renewal. Hence, the precarious nature of cultural proclivities and self-interest reveals the need for authenticity to remain embedded in a larger moral framework, to avoid what Taylor calls the 'expressivist outlook', where meaning is something to be created rather than received. Accordingly, if authenticity is pursued in an entirely self-referential manner, disconnected from broader ethical responsibilities, it risks promoting a consumer model of the church. As Taylor highlights:

The religious life or practice that I become part of must not only be my choice, but it must speak to me, it must make sense in terms of my spiritual development as I understand this. This takes us farther. The choice of denomination was understood to take place within a fixed cadre, say that of the apostles' creed, the faith of the broader "church". Within this framework of belief, I choose the church in which I feel most comfortable. But if the focus is going now to be on my spiritual path, thus on what insights come to me in the subtler languages that I find meaningful, then maintaining this or any other framework becomes increasingly difficult.³⁰

This critique is particularly relevant to *Fresh Expressions*, which, while effective in reaching new groups, may inadvertently foster the liberal instinct of a market-driven approach towards church-growth and spiritual renewal, whereby the church is shaped more by cultural demand than by deep theological reflection. In turn, demographic targeting and innovative church models risk framing faith communities as spiritual 'lifestyle choices' rather than as enduring expressions of the body of Christ beyond the imminence of the moment or language of personal 'choice'.

³⁰ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 486.

Summary

Tracing the contours of church decline in Britain—from the parish-and-manor symbiosis of the eighteenth century to the statistical dashboards of the twenty-first—reveals a recurring truth: numbers alone cannot tell the whole story. The flourishing of the Church of England has always been bound with the shifting currents of social change, industrialisation, and secularisation, but also with its own ability (or inability) to remain woven into the fabric of everyday life. While the data sets and statistical analysis provide valuable insight into patterns of affiliation, attendance, and generational retention, the interpretation of those figures is never neutral. As we have seen, the history of ecclesiastical commentary on decline demonstrates that data can be narrated as evidence of crisis, stability, or even renewal, depending on the lens applied.

The tension between empirical evidence and the lived reality of the local church is not a modern problem; it is embedded in the church's long struggle to balance institutional identity with cultural adaptation. Contemporary growth initiatives—whether through strategic resourcing, Fresh Expressions, or demographic targeting—reflect a genuine desire to address numerical decline. However, they also risk adopting a market logic that redefines faith communities as products for consumption. The challenge, therefore, is not simply to 'reverse the numbers' but to ask what kind of church the numbers are meant to serve.

If declining attendance is approached only as a loss to be offset by innovation, without deeper reflection on the theological and social nature of belonging, the Church of England risks further fragmentation and isolation from the common good. But if statistical analysis is integrated with a more nuanced, historically grounded understanding of social change—and if ecclesial identity is allowed to shape, rather than merely react to, cultural trends—the narrative of decline need not be the Church of England's only story. In this light, the real measure of vitality may not be found solely in the October counts, but in the church's

capacity to inhabit meaningfully the shared, interdependent life of its people and parish, resisting the reduction of the Gospel to a market commodity and reasserting its role as a common good in the public square. In short, if the Church of England's strategy for addressing decline is primarily shaped by the organising logic of growth methodologies and organisational theory, it may struggle to sustain a coherent and theologically rooted ecclesial identity.

To pursue this further, we now turn to the *Renewal and Reform* programme as a specific response to decline that exemplifies much of the contemporary organisational approach governing the Church of England's logic and funding at the national level.

Resourcing the future? *Critiquing the discourse of Renewal and Reform*

Introduction

In the last section, we traced the numerical decline of the Church of England, noting that despite any nostalgic claims, there has never been a ‘perfect’ moment or era of sustained growth within the church. Due to varying models, conclusions drawn from statistics can range widely depending on the agenda or presuppositions driving the analysis. Additionally, these figures of decline function within a broader narrative that reveals, in many ways, that the challenges facing the church today are no different from those of the past. Doubt and dissent are intrinsic to ecclesial life. In this section, we therefore turn our attention to what has become an obvious question: Why is the numerical decline in the church a problem? More specifically, why is numerical decline a problem for the Church of England? Whilst this may seem something of an oxymoron—if we are to believe all that our consumer culture has taught us, namely that ‘bigger is better’—decline has become a corollary of failure, or in the case of the church, a slow death. In the face of this numerical decline, the issues of sustainability and resourcing have become salient themes of managing the church within a finite economy.

In response to numerical decline since the late 1980s, the Church of England (CofE) has launched numerous initiatives to stimulate growth. These have ranged from programmes such as the ‘Decade of Evangelism’ at the start of the 1990s to *Fresh Expressions* in 2004 that encouraged ‘innovative’ forms of worship. Following a mixed reception within the broader CofE, strategic initiatives subsequently became the focus of the General Synod, paving the way for the *Church Growth Research Programme* in 2011, investigating factors

influencing church growth across the wider communion. The research culminated in the 2014 report, *From Anecdote to Evidence* (AtoE), that prepared the ground for the *Renewal and Reform* (RR) programme in 2015, which, with the backing of General Synod, reframed decline as ‘a moment of great opportunity for the Church of England’.³¹

Within the course of just two decades, the CofE had begun adopting practices and terminology to guide ‘a new direction for the church’ that echoed much of the commodifying economic and managerial language of late-capitalist industry. Guiding this initiative was a new ‘task force’ established with the explicit intent of ‘advancing [the church’s] spiritual and numerical growth, reimagining its ministry for the 21st century to help ensure there is a growing and sustainable Christian witness in every community; and contributing towards the common good.’³²

Taken at face value, the three ambitious goals set out in the *Report of the Task Force on Resourcing the Future of the Church of England* (RTF) appear to be positive steps towards a ‘growing and sustainable’ church. However, despite the report’s clear focus on growth and mission, the ecclesial horizon remains unclear, with no reflection or data analysis to identify the factors underlying the decline in church attendance. Yet the expressed intent to ‘turnaround the church’s decline’ remains without substantive analysis of its underlying causes.³³ The RTF report is quick to emphasise that any investment of central resources is intentional, with a singular aim ‘to achieve the ambition of growth’.³⁴ Key to this ambition is the ‘fundamental shift’ of funding formulas used for distributing finances to diocese, which in turn has adjusted the nomenclature, from ‘subsidy’ to ‘investment’, that exercises a

³¹ General Synod, *Report of the Task Force on Resourcing the Future of the Church of England*, Church of England (General Synod of the Church of England, 2015), par. 1.

³² General Synod, *Resourcing the Future*, par. 1.

³³ General Synod, *Resourcing the Future*, par. 3.

³⁴ General Synod, *Resourcing the Future*, par. 2.

preference for churches that can demonstrate clear ‘strategic plans for growth’.³⁵ Foundational to this campaign is the term ‘strategy’, which guides decisions based on their effectiveness in achieving desired objectives, facilitated by a calculus that weighs costs against benefits. Whilst intentionality might be considered desirable for producing results, under these conditions, the goal of growth is vulnerable to becoming an end in itself.

As we shall see, such a construal of growth as an ecclesial ideology is not without its risks—potentially missing the contours and realities of the local congregation and parish—raising the question as to whether the church is truly being renewed and reformed or conformed to the organising logic of the market. Thus, if growth is good for sustaining the life of the church, what can be learned (or corrected) from the trend of contemporary initiatives seeking to resource the future CofE? Before turning to methodology, we must examine how decline became translated into governance through initiatives arising from the CofE’s *Church Growth Research Programme*.

Limiting factors and decline

The most recent census for England and Wales (2021) recorded a continued decline in Christian affiliation: 46.3% in England and 43.6% in Wales identified as ‘Christian’ (down from 59.3% in 2011). Yet despite this significant decrease, Christianity remains the most common religious identification in England and Wales.³⁶ The figures register change, but they do not in themselves determine what that change means. Accordingly, decline is observable, but its interpretation is not always self-evident. As Jane Garnett (et al.) observes, institutional decline does not imply the disappearance of Christianity from British culture.

³⁵ General Synod, *Resourcing the Future*, par. 4.

³⁶ “Religion, England and Wales: Census 2021,” Office for National Statistics, updated 5 December 2022 12:00 (GMT), 2022, accessed 30 October, 2024, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/religion/bulletins/religionenglandandwales/census2021>.

Contemporary analysis is often ‘greatly exercised by the collation and measurement of religiosity, particularly institutional membership and practice’.³⁷ The difficulty is not in collecting data, but in how institutional metrics become determinative of the narrative. When ecclesial vitality is equated primarily with attendance and affiliation, decline appears as failure within a particular evaluative frame. Yet that frame is itself selective. The more pressing question, therefore, is how statistical description becomes translated into governance.

Central to answering this question is the 2014 report commissioned by the ‘Spending Plans Task Group’ on behalf of the Archbishops’ Council and the church Commissioners, entitled: *From Anecdote to Evidence: Findings from the Church Growth Research Programme 2011–2013* (AtoE).³⁸ Over an 18-month period (2011–2013), the ‘Church Growth Research Programme’ (CGRP) conducted a study on the factors influencing church growth in the CofE. Led by Professor David Voas, the programme sought to move beyond anecdotal accounts of growth and decline towards a systematic empirical analysis. Its rationale was explicit: church attendance was declining, and practical evidence was needed to identify effective ways to support mission.

The report acknowledged substantial limitations, including challenges concerning data quality and availability.³⁹ Nevertheless, it advanced a series of recommendations aimed at growth: strategic amalgamations, revitalisation initiatives, the development of ‘greater churches’ (resource churches with strong public and civic profiles), and increased intentionality among the clergy. The ambition was not merely descriptive. It was programmatic.

³⁷ Garnett et al., *Redefining Christian Britain*, 2.

³⁸ David Voas et al., *From Anecdote to Evidence: Findings from the Church Growth Research Programme 2011–2013*, The Church Commissioners for England (June 2014).

³⁹ Voas et al., *From Anecdote to Evidence*, 7.

Using cooking as a metaphor, the authors outline a suite of common factors (or ‘ingredients’) associated with growing churches. Yet they are also keen to stress that these factors (ingredients) do not inherently comprise a ‘single recipe’ for growth, noting that what works in one place may not work in another, stating:

There is no single recipe for growth; there are no simple solutions to decline. The road to growth depends on the context, and what works in one place may not work in another. What seems crucial is that congregations are constantly engaged in reflection; churches cannot soar on autopilot. Growth is a product of good leadership (lay and ordained) working with a willing set of churchgoers in a favourable environment.⁴⁰

Further to this assessment, the report seeks a balanced view of the contemporary characteristics influencing church growth by organising datasets and research into three distinct ‘strands’ of enquiry: Data Analysis, church Profiling, and Structures. The first employed statistical modelling of parish and diocesan data; the second gathered survey material to construct profiles of growing churches; the third examined structural developments such as church planting, Fresh Expressions, and benefice amalgamation. Taken together, this was the most comprehensive multi-method study of growth within the CofE to date. Central to the ‘Data Analysis’ strand was the use of linear regression modelling. Linear regression allows researchers to estimate relationships between variables while controlling for others. It offers a structured way to identify patterns over time and distinguish correlation from mere coincidence. Properly used, it is a valuable analytical tool.

In an addendum report, Voas and Laura Watt concluded that the decline was largely attributable to ‘the failure to replace older generations of churchgoers. The problem is not adults leaving the church: it is that half of the children of churchgoing parents do not attend when they reach adulthood.’⁴¹ The strategic implication is clear: retention of children and youth is critical. This conclusion did not, in itself, mandate a managerial response. Yet it

⁴⁰ Voas et al., *From Anecdote to Evidence*, 8.

⁴¹ David Voas and Laura Watt, *Numerical Change in Church Attendance: National, Local and Individual Factors*, The Church Commissioners for England (February 2014), 2.

did embed a narrative of decline grounded in demographic modelling. Once decline is framed primarily as a problem of generational replacement, certain institutional responses follow with the appearance of inevitability: concentrate resources where growth potential is strongest, inevitably prioritise youth retention, and pursue measurable outcomes. As Voas and Watt conceded: 'The church is faced with a strategic challenge: the question is whether the focus should be on supporting areas of existing strength or on developing churches that are growing but not yet as significant in absolute terms.'⁴² Statistical modelling does not dictate these strategies; rather, it validates the institutional strategies that seem most prudent.

It is important to clarify what statistical modelling can and cannot accomplish. Linear regression identifies associations; it does not establish causation. As the AtoE report itself acknowledges, 'association does not establish causality'.⁴³ Statistical controls reduce confounding variables, but they cannot fully account for theological conviction, liturgical depth, patterns of pastoral care, or the diffuse cultural presence of Christian witness beyond attendance metrics. Voas and Watt also noted the difficulty of measuring growth accurately. Attendance indicators are subject to random fluctuation and measurement error, particularly in smaller congregations where minor numerical changes produce large proportional shifts. They note that 'variability poses particular problems with small churches, where the addition or subtraction of just a few people produces large proportional changes in the totals.'⁴⁴ Such methodological cautions are not incidental. They remind us that precise numbers do not automatically yield a full understanding of what they measure.

Subsequent research further complicated the picture. Using large data sets prepared by the CofE Research and Statistics Unit, Fiona Tweedie's 2016 research paper, 'Going

⁴² Voas and Watt, *Numerical Change in Church Attendance*, 2.

⁴³ Voas et al., *From Anecdote to Evidence*, 8.

⁴⁴ Voas and Watt, *Numerical Change in Church Attendance*, 5.

Deeper: church attendance statistics and clergy deployment’, suggested that ‘an increase in clergy is associated with the likelihood of growth in attendance, while a decrease in clergy is associated, on average, to a decline in attendance.’⁴⁵ Yet even here, correlation did not imply causation. Multi-parish benefices were associated with administrative burden and mixed clergy experience. Growth patterns were uneven and often concentrated in a minority of rapidly expanding congregations in urban areas rather than evenly distributed across the parish system as a whole.

What emerges from these studies is not a single, uncontested explanation of decline, but a series of statistically framed narratives shaped by variable selection, modelling assumptions, and interpretive emphasis. Small adjustments in time frame, grouping, or control variables yield different emphases. Statistical analysis, therefore, does not simply reveal reality; it represents it according to structured methodological choices. This observation need not imply intentional distortion. The use of statistical modelling within the CofE has been undertaken in good faith and with pastoral concern. Yet what often remains unexamined, particularly from a theological perspective, is how statistical description functions normatively once it enters ecclesial discourse.

When decline is rendered through regression curves, demographic projections, and comparative metrics, it becomes available for institutional redesign. Statistical modelling does not merely describe ecclesial decline; it provides the blueprint from which reform is constructed. When decline is rendered in these terms, the church is tacitly imagined as an entity that can be recalibrated for improved performance. In this respect, empirical analysis begins to function as a proto-ecclesiology—one that subtly privileges manageability over mystery, optimisation over communion. The difficulty is not methodological but theological. Statistical modelling is a legitimate and valuable tool. However, when it

⁴⁵ Fiona Tweedie, *Going Deeper: Church Attendance Statistics and Clergy Deployment*, Church of England (June 2016), 1.

becomes the dominant interpretive frame, it predisposes governance toward a technocratic response. What is measured becomes that which must be improved. What is modelled becomes that which must be managed.

Decline, under these conditions, is no longer simply a pastoral reality requiring discernment. It becomes a performance deficit requiring correction. Growth shifts from being one possible sign of vitality to the governing criterion of legitimacy. The logic of optimisation follows naturally from the blueprint already drawn. To interrogate this translation is not to reject empirical evidence. It is to recognise its limits and to resist allowing statistical representation to define the theological horizon. Without such calibration, the movement from data to design to strategy can proceed unexamined, and managerial rationality can assume the status of common sense rather than one contested account of ecclesial flourishing.

It is at this juncture that a more critical approach to ecclesiology becomes necessary—not to deny the reality of decline, but to ask what kind of body the church imagines itself to be when reform is drawn according to managerial lines. We turn now to the methodology that will guide this thesis, enabling an examination not only of the church's stated strategies and growth objectives but also of the assumptions, metaphors, and norms that shape how growth, mission, and ecclesial life are understood and enacted.

Critical ecclesiology as methodology

This thesis advances a mode of critical ecclesiology through an extended exercise in comparative political theology, pursued within a cultural–linguistic register. Contemporary debates about mission, growth, and ecclesial vitality are treated not primarily as disagreements over strategy or effectiveness, but as contests between rival accounts that encode competing political imaginations of the church as the body of Christ. Within this

framework, growth is understood as a normatively charged concept that orders ecclesial life toward particular goods, shaping how authority, belonging, embodiment, and faithfulness are named and practised. The task of this thesis is therefore constructive rather than merely diagnostic: it adopts a reparative approach that places rival accounts of church management into sustained comparison, with the aim of reorientating faithful ecclesial life amid the pressures of contemporary church decline.

Methodologically, this comparative work is grounded in an ecclesiological expansion of Nancy Eiesland's symbolic linkage between the church and the disabled body. Eiesland's *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* is employed not simply as a thematic resource but as a political–theological heuristic that renders visible the normative assumptions embedded within ecclesial models, which we will explore in the next section. By refusing ideals of bodily perfection, coherence, and optimisation, her work establishes a critical standpoint from which current ecclesiological models may be evaluated according to the forms of embodiment, dependency, vulnerability, and difference they authorise or marginalise. Eiesland articulates this paradigm with particular clarity when she writes:

There is no perfect church as there is no “perfect” body. Yet the church whose calling is to be a communion of struggle is made possible, though not made easy, by brokenness. The members of the church represent an essential diversity, interrelated by necessity and often hating the very differences that make us indispensable to one another. We recognise our differences and hold and trust our common calling as people of God, the foundation of church.⁴⁶

Read methodologically, this claim furnishes the conditions for a comparative political theology of the church. It displaces evaluative criteria rooted in institutional success, coherence, or optimisation, and instead directs theological judgment toward the practices through which interdependence, difference, and shared vocation are rendered intelligible within the life of the Body of Christ.

⁴⁶ Nancy L. Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Towards a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Abingdon Press, 1994), 108–09.

Within a comparative political–theological frame, this methodology attends to the way rival ecclesial metaphors function as an organising logic. Managerialist and growth-oriented ecclesiologies tend to construe the body of Christ through metaphors of organism or system, privileging efficiency, scalability, and numerical gain as signs of vitality. By contrast, a hermeneutic of disability—read in dialogue with Pauline body theology—contests these norms by foregrounding interdependence, fragility, and asymmetry as constitutive rather than deficient features of ecclesial life (or something to overcome). This thesis, therefore, traces how these rival representations negotiate difference, shape church polity, and articulate the telos of ecclesial flourishing.

Throughout this thesis, ecclesiology is treated not as a purely doctrinal abstraction but as a lived, embodied polity formed through practices, habits, and power relations. In this respect, the thesis resonates with the practical–prophetic ecclesiology proposed by Nicholas Healy, which insists that theological accounts of the church must remain accountable to the concrete practices, failures, and reform of actual ecclesial communities. Attention to language, ritual, and institutional imagination reflects this same cultural–linguistic commitment: ecclesial realities are not merely described by theological discourse but are materially shaped by it. Accordingly, the church is not a purely theoretical community but is, in part, socially constructed—as a social reification of the Doctrine of God—revealing what Martyn Percy highlights as the ‘theological priorities and spiritual proclivities’ shaping the contemporary church.⁴⁷ Given these priorities, there is no ‘one size fits all’ approach to growth. Rather, as Marcus Moberg observes in his book *Church, Market, and Media*, the central role of language and discourse drives social change, particularly through the curated processes of ‘marketization’ and ‘mediaization’ that influence much of contemporary

⁴⁷ Martyn Percy, *The Future Shapes of Anglicanism: Currents, Counters, Charts* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), 20.

religious transformation.⁴⁸ Most notably, Moberg highlights the extent to which the CofE's engagement with social, economic, and media contexts is not merely reflective but constitutive, shaping both institutional priorities and public perception. Through an analysis of Archbishops' Council documents, reports, internal theological reflections, and General Synod debates, he traces how growth language mediates power, authority, and legitimacy, highlighting the significance of performative and rhetorical strategies in sustaining institutional narratives and demonstrating how language functions simultaneously as a tool of governance and a site of negotiation and contestation.⁴⁹ Comparative political theology thus functions as the primary analytical method, allowing the thesis to examine how theological claims about the church operate performatively within concrete ecclesial contexts.

The constructive aim of the thesis, therefore, is to retrieve and develop an account of the church as a eucharistic polity whose faithfulness is disclosed not through triumph, optimisation, or growth alone, but through its capacity to remain a communion capable of embodied interdependence and care. Grounded in Eiesland's methodological paradigm, the thesis argues that ecclesial precarity is therefore not an obstacle to mission or 'legitimation crisis' to be overcome, but a theological site in which the Body of Christ is most truthfully known.

Rival accounts of ecclesial embodiment and care

Building on this methodological framework, and through a comparative reading of rival ecclesial imaginaries, the implications for contemporary mission and growth become clear. If the church is understood as a eucharistic polity whose identity is formed through

⁴⁸ Moberg, *Church, Market, and Media*, 39.

⁴⁹ Moberg, *Church, Market, and Media*, 98–109.

embodied practices, relational interdependence, and negotiated power, then approaches to mission and growth that rely primarily on abstract strategy or managerial logic risk misrepresenting the nature of the church. Growth is not a neutral metric; it is a normatively charged concept that encodes assumptions about flourishing, legitimates particular forms of authority, and presumes a determinate telos, thereby shaping how parishes, priests, and congregants understand their calling. A critical ecclesiology attentive to these dynamics can therefore both diagnose exclusion and suggest pathways toward more faithful, inclusive, and embodied practice.

In this respect, Paulo Freire's account of embodied participation and transformative praxis is instructive. His pedagogy foregrounds the epistemic authority of those rendered marginal and insists that authentic formation requires dialogical practices that reconfigure power, agency, and participation within concrete communal life.

Freire famously rejects what he terms the 'banking concept of education', which reduces learners to 'receiving, filling, and storing the deposits'.⁵⁰ The strength of his methodology in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* lies in its insistence that critique must be oriented toward liberation: oppression is first made visible, but awareness alone is insufficient; a change in praxis is required for lasting transformation to social structures. As Freire observes: 'Education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers *and* students.'⁵¹

Applied ecclesologically, this principle highlights the need for those labelled 'disabled' to be formative participants in shaping the church, rather than passive subjects of critique. A hermeneutic of disability exposes normative assumptions embedded in ecclesial models—such as able-bodiedness, independence, productivity, and verbal competence—that

⁵⁰ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos, 50th Anniversary ed. (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 72.

⁵¹ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 72.

structure liturgy, leadership, and sacramental participation. Its primary contribution is critical: revealing exclusion not as accidental but as structurally embedded within dominant ecclesial practices and metaphors, and making visible the ways authority, belonging, and participation are mediated within the Body of Christ.

At the same time, disability hermeneutics provides a constructive orientation grounded in Pauline theology, particularly 1 Corinthians 12. The church is reimagined not as an institution defined by uniform participation, managerial efficiency, or numeric growth, but as a community whose identity is constituted by interdependence, fragility, and asymmetry. Vulnerability and limitation are not deficits but theologically formative features of ecclesial life. The aim is not to produce a single, self-contained alternative model of church organisation, but to orient practice toward sustaining relationality, shared vocation, and embodied participation. Consistent with Freire's principle of praxis, this requires that critique be paired with participatory engagement: disabled voices must actively shape ecclesial structures and practices, ensuring that theological reflection leads to tangible transformation rather than remaining a purely diagnostic exercise.

From this perspective, growth-oriented frameworks, particularly those deployed at a diocesan or national level, must be read critically. Abstract plans and strategic models often presume an ecclesial body conceived as a system or organism, privileging efficiency, visibility, and scalability. Such models follow the logic of the market and risk marginalising the practices, rhythms, and forms of faithfulness that emerge in local parishes through care, presence, and endurance rather than expansion. A critical ecclesiology informed by a disability hermeneutic thus illuminates these tensions: clarifying which bodies, practices, and voices are rendered visible or viable, and which are made peripheral or invisible. Doing so enables the church to assess whether growth discourses align with its eucharistic ecclesial horizon. In short, disability hermeneutics, read through a Freirean lens of liberation, provide both a diagnostic and a constructive tool: they reveal structural exclusion,

foreground the normative assumptions shaping ecclesial life, and orient the church toward practices that sustain interdependence, difference, and faithful participation.

This comparative framework may be further clarified through engagement with Nel Noddings' distinction between *caring-about* and *caring-for*. In her analysis of 'caring' organisations, Noddings cautions against attributing to institutions a capacity that rightly belongs to interpersonal relations alone. She expresses this limitation with particular clarity:

Large organizations such as social services, schools, and nations cannot care directly: that is, they cannot care-for in the sense prescribed by care theory. Caring-for requires a person-to-person relationship in which both carer and cared-for play essential roles. No institution can do this. What it can do is to provide and support the conditions under which caring relations can prosper.⁵²

Noddings' suggests that, at best, institutional bodies operate at the level of *caring-about*: articulating policy-level concern and seeking to establish conditions in which person-to-person caring-for may occur. Failures in care often arise at the point of transition between policy-level abstraction and on-site relational attentiveness. This distinction illuminates a structural tension within contemporary ecclesial discourse. The language of 'care' frequently appears within strategic and growth-oriented documents, yet such usage risks remaining at the level of caring-about—articulating institutional concern in abstract or programmatic form—without sustaining the relational practices through which ecclesial life is actually constituted.

At this juncture, however, a theological divergence becomes evident. Whereas Noddings' account is rooted in a secular, needs-based relational ethic, an ecclesiology of care, grounded in the body of Christ, cannot be confined to the provision of supportive conditions for interpersonal responsiveness. The church is not merely an organisation that facilitates care; it is a sacramental communion in which members are ontologically bound to one another, through baptism, in Christ. Care, therefore, is not simply an instrumental

⁵² Nel Noddings, "Care Ethics and "Caring" Organizations," in *Care Ethics and Political Theory*, ed. Daniel Engster and Maurice Hamington (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 83.

function of ecclesial administration, nor a normative ethic appended to institutional life, but an expression of the church's participation in the self-giving life of God. Read alongside disability hermeneutics, Noddings sharpens the methodological task of this thesis: to discern whether contemporary growth-oriented governance operates primarily at the level of *caring-about*—strategic concern for institutional sustainability—or whether it sustains the embodied, reciprocal, and ecclesially constituted practices of *caring-for* through which the body of Christ is made known. This distinction will be explored further in Chapter Five, where the church's identity as a disabled body is developed in dialogue with feminist critiques of care ethics, attending to its asymmetrical character and the need to guard against potential distortion and abuse. These insights inform the subsequent analysis of mission and growth, clarifying how language, strategy, and institutional priorities function not as neutral tools but as forces that shape the embodied, relational, and political life of the contemporary church.

Managerial rationality in contemporary church governance

The predominance of managerial rationality within the contemporary Church of England is not a recent innovation, nor can it be attributed to any single reforming programme. Rather, it reflects a gradual incorporation of late-modern governance practices (particularly those associated with audit culture, strategic planning, performance measurement, and leadership theory) into ecclesial structures across the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. These developments occurred within the broader political context of New Public Management (NPM), which reshaped British public institutions from the 1980s onward by emphasising accountability, measurable outcomes, efficiency, and executive leadership. As noted earlier, Moberg demonstrates the extent to which marketisation and mediatization within the contemporary church do not simply respond to such cultural shifts; they internalise them through discursive adaptation, gradually absorbing managerial vocabularies

that function simultaneously as tools of governance and as formative grammars of self-understanding.

Within this broader management culture, the language of ‘leadership’ increasingly supplants the historic and theological idioms of vocation, cure of souls, pastoral oversight, and episcopal care. Rahel Lilia Siebald’s doctoral study, *A Forgotten History of Leadership: Recollecting Church in the Age of Human Resource Management*, traces this development genealogically, arguing that contemporary ecclesial leadership discourse is not a timeless theological category but a distinctly modern construct emerging from the history of industrial management and labour relations⁵³. Rather than arising organically from theological reflection, leadership theory develops within what she terms an ‘Age of Human Resource Management’, in which the language of vision, capacity, and strategic direction becomes a technology for organising institutional life.⁵⁴

In her analysis of Justin Lewis-Anthony’s models of leadership (Missional-Leadership, Managerial-Leadership, and Mythological-Leadership), Siebald identifies that Managerial-Leadership demonstrates the extent to which contemporary church leadership literature began to mirror secular management theory, thus rendering managerial assumptions a form of ecclesiological common sense.⁵⁵ Leadership discourse, she notes, appears persuasive because it resonates with late-modern anxieties about coherence, effectiveness, and vision. Yet its adoption within church contexts is rarely perceived as an ideological import; rather, it presents itself as a form of faithful stewardship, responsible governance, and necessary adaptation in the face of institutional decline. Siebald identifies the subtle ‘silencing effect’ this import can have upon congregational life, insofar as

⁵³ Rahel L. Siebald, “A Forgotten History of Leadership: Recollecting Church in the Age of Human Resource Management” (PhD University of Aberdeen, 2024), 98–99.

⁵⁴ Siebald, “A Forgotten History of Leadership,” 14.

⁵⁵ Siebald, “A Forgotten History of Leadership,” 22.

leadership paradigms privilege executive agency and strategic vision over practices of shared discernment.⁵⁶ Leaders lead, and congregants follow. In this respect, ministerial formation is gradually reconfigured around organisational competence and measurable effectiveness rather than sacramental presence or pastoral attentiveness.

Although Siebald's focus lies primarily within evangelical contexts, the dynamics she identifies resonate strongly within the CofE's evolving discourse of strategic capacity, talent development, and growth-oriented governance. Here, leadership becomes increasingly coterminous with management; strategy substitutes for discernment; and growth functions as the legitimating index of faithful ministry. The managerial lexicon—vision-casting, benchmarking, pipeline development, investment streams, strategic oversight—appears not as an alien imposition but as the common-sense vocabulary of responsible institutional care. This shift was reinforced by the increasing embedding of audit mechanisms into church life. Statistical modelling, such as that deployed within the CofE's *Church Growth Research Programme*, provided the empirical architecture through which decline could be rendered measurable and growth actionable. Even where reports cautioned that correlation does not establish causation, the availability of quantifiable data created the impression that effective governance required strategic optimisation. In this environment, managerial rationality presented itself as the necessary empirical response to institutional fragility. What began as administrative prudence gradually hardened into a governing assumption.

Importantly, this incorporation was rarely framed as theological innovation. It was presented instead as a neutral technique. Yet governance practices are never merely technical. They carry implicit anthropologies and ecclesiologies: assumptions about agency, authority, legitimacy, and flourishing. As NPM privileged efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control within public institutions, parallel logics quietly reshaped church

⁵⁶ Siebald, "A Forgotten History of Leadership," 195.

polity. Faithfulness became increasingly entangled with demonstrable growth; vitality with scale; renewal with strategic performance. In this way, managerial rationality did not simply assist ecclesial administration—it recalibrated the criteria by which ecclesial flourishing was recognised and authorised.

The significance of this history is not to ascribe motive, but to identify the conditions under which managerial rationality became normative within church governance. The managerial turn gained traction precisely because it appeared prudent, responsible, and empirically grounded. Its plausibility rendered it largely unquestioned from a theological perspective. What has emerged, therefore, is not merely improved management, but a reconfiguration of church polity in which strategic optimisation risks becoming the organising principle of ecclesial life. When growth becomes the governing index of legitimacy, the church’s embodied practices of interdependence, vulnerability, and care risk being measured according to standards external to its sacramental vocation.

Managerialism and the polity of growth

In recent years, there have been many publications and programmes within the CofE that seek to address and promote numerical growth. Amongst them is a section on the CofE website dedicated to the RR programme, which states that ‘one of the clear and intended outcomes of this work is to reverse the decline of the Church of England so that we become a growing church’.⁵⁷ Whilst suggestive of a broad outlook and desire for improved governance, the implicit and unnamed metric for success is numerical. The emphasis of the statement is singular, symptomatic of a narrative of scarcity and managing decline (despite claims to the contrary). Accordingly, the use of the term ‘mission’ becomes coterminous with the language of ‘church growth’, which, as Jeremy Worthen contends, causes the

⁵⁷ “More About Renewal and Reform,” (Website), Church of England, accessed 12 January, 2018, <https://www.churchofengland.org/about/renewal-and-reform/more-about-renewal-reform/>.

language of ‘renewal’ to be ‘presented instrumentally as a means to the end of sharing the gospel, rather than sharing the gospel being itself the locus of the church’s renewal, its source as well as its end’.⁵⁸ Through the latter configuration, the Gospel is understood as ‘the locus of the church’s renewal’, where renewal and evangelisation are configured relationally, as ‘mutually reinforcing and dynamic’ rather than instrumentalised through a ‘one-way street’.⁵⁹ This means-end approach is something Stephen Pickard cautions against, raising concerns about a Pelagian tendency in ecclesiology, whereby human agency becomes conflated with divine action.⁶⁰ How, then, does the growth discourse within the RR programme trace or avoid an ecclesial form of reductionism?

A key biblical passage underpinning the growth discourse within the RR programme is ‘The Mission of the Seventy’ in the Gospel of Luke (Luke 10.2).⁶¹ In the 2016 document: *A Vision and Narrative for Renewal and Reform*, this passage is invoked under the heading ‘A plentiful harvest’ as the scriptural foundation for the programme (as cited from the NIV translation): ‘The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field’.⁶² For the purposes of the RR programme, the exegesis of this scripture serves not merely as a theological illustration but as a discursive mechanism that legitimises the programme’s emphasis on mission for growth. By framing growth as divinely sanctioned and urgent in this way, the passage becomes normatively charged, shaping perceptions of ministry, prioritising resource allocation, and reinforcing the imperative for congregational and institutional expansion within the Church of England. Whilst this agrarian symbolism is widely recognised as consummate with evangelism, it is worth noting how this focused (and arguably circumscribed) use of the text

⁵⁸ Jeremy Worthen, “What’s New About Renewal in *Evangelii Gaudium*?” *Ecclesiology* 12, no. 1 (2016): 87.

⁵⁹ Worthen, “What’s New About Renewal in *Evangelii Gaudium*?” 47, 88.

⁶⁰ Stephen Pickard, *Seeking the Church: An Introduction to Ecclesiology* (Norwich: SCM Press, 2012), 73–77.

⁶¹ Church of England, “More About Renewal and Reform.”

⁶² William Nye, “A Vision and Narrative for Renewal and Reform” (General Synod, General Synod of the Church of England, June 2016), §2.

within the RR programme misses the broader context of the passage, which also includes the prohibition of self-sufficiency:

After this the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them two by two ahead of him to every town and place where he was about to go. He told them, “The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field. Go! I am sending you out like lambs among wolves. Do not take a purse or bag or sandals; and do not greet anyone on the road.”⁶³

When read within this wider context, Darrell L. Bock points out that whilst the injunction ‘Do not take a purse or bag or sandals’ evokes the urgency to travel light, it also serves as a reminder that God is the one who provides.⁶⁴ Narrowing the meaning by instrumentalising the passage to a single verse thus obviates divine provision, introducing a potential confusion over sovereignty and agency. This evokes questions such as: Who does the recruiting and sending of the workers? Is the harvest really that plentiful? Or perhaps, more prescient, who produced the crop in the first place? As Bock observes, the ‘labourers’ emerge as a result of prayer intercession that flows *from* the abundant economy of God rather than a product of human will.⁶⁵ The gift of harvest and the subsequent means of gathering is therefore predicated by reliance upon the Holy Spirit rather than the hegemonism of marketing, management, strategies, or tactics.

This same dependence on the Spirit is a point that Samuel Wells raises in a response paper to the RR programme: ‘A Future that’s Bigger than the Past: Renewal and Reform in the Church of England’, which narrates numerical decline within a David-Goliath allegory. Wells contends the reason decline is such a problem for the CofE is because it ‘has assumed for as long as anyone can remember that it’s supposed to be Goliath. It’s

⁶³ Luke 10.1-4 (NIV)

⁶⁴ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996), 117.

⁶⁵ Bock, *Luke*, 116.

supposed to be huge, it's supposed to be important'.⁶⁶ In contrast to this, he proposes the church should be more akin to David:

The task for the Church of England in the twenty-first century is not to become Goliath again. It's to become David—the David who had five smooth stones—but knew exactly how to use them; the David people instantly called to mind when they encountered the disarmed, disarming figure of Jesus.⁶⁷

Wells further illustrates this power differential, stating:

God gives the church everything it needs, and if the church experiences its existence as scarcity, that's largely because it has neglected the gifts God has sent it. [...] The church is founded on and comprised of stones that the builders rejected. The challenge for the church is to see Jesus in the face of the one we have rejected.⁶⁸

The shift in narrative from scarcity to gift challenges the tendency to assume that Christianity might be less true if fewer people believe (or attend church). This theological recalibration around scarcity and gift exposes the managerialist assumptions that reappear at the level of governance, where growth is framed as a strategic imperative rather than as receptive participation in divine provision. In seeking to reform long-standing institutional structures, RR programme documents (particularly *Resourcing the Future*) increasingly draw upon a managerial discourse framed within an economy of scarcity. Throughout the report, terms and phrases such as 'institutional agility', 'flexibility' and 'strategic capacity' are employed to promote and achieve 'church growth'.

Under the heading 'Good Growth', the report further emphasises the 'theological imperative' of 'good growth' defined as a numerical and spiritual convergence, which preferably orientates towards the poorest communities and is only fully realised when it reaches this aim. While this definition of 'good growth' reflects a deliberate attempt at balance, it simultaneously frames growth as an ethically charged objective, thereby exposing

⁶⁶ Samuel Wells, "A Future that's Bigger than the Past: Renewal and Reform in the Church of England," (1 July 2016 2016): 1. <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2018-01/a-future-thats-bigger-than-the-past-renewal-and-reform-in-the-church-of-england.pdf>.

⁶⁷ Wells, "A Future that's Bigger than the Past: Renewal and Reform in the Church of England," 1.

⁶⁸ Wells, "A Future that's Bigger than the Past: Renewal and Reform in the Church of England," 5.

the inherent tension between normative aspiration and quantifiable outcomes. The language used throughout highlights the need for the church to adopt new thinking and practices. The report goes on to state:

Our proposals about the funding stream for proactive investment in growth—and everything we recommend—are critically dependent on dioceses being strategic about their mission activity and leadership requirements. **Some dioceses may, therefore, wish to apply for some development funding to help develop their strategic capacity.** This will put them in a better position to make a more substantial application for funding to advance their mission and growth.⁶⁹

This excerpt illustrates the technologisation of discourse in service of abstract, context-independent goals. Terms such as ‘critically dependent’ and ‘strategic capacity’, ‘mission activity’, and ‘development funding’ reveal a sense of urgency and the need to strategically and organisationally respond. A further example of the adoption of this technologisation discourse can be seen in the 2014 report ‘Talent Management for Future Leaders and Leadership Development for Bishops and Deans: A New Approach’, prepared by a steering group chaired by Prebendary the Lord Green, a former HSBC bank chairman. Under the heading ‘Principles and Ambitions’, the ‘Green report’ emphasises the need to ‘develop clergy of exceptional leadership potential to make a significant impact’, incorporating a development stream of individuals graded as ‘early promise’, ‘exceptional potential’, or ‘ready now’.⁷⁰ Through process management and a ‘talent database’, senior leaders are identified and equipped with MBA-type organisational skills in order to ‘help redefine and reshape the church’s leadership roles’.⁷¹ In defence of any accusation of managerialism, the report attempts a theological move to qualify the term ‘profession’ as consummate with the church’s ministry and vocation:

[The use of] ‘profession’ in a clergy context must be seen as possessing not one meaning but two: on one hand to describe the sociological reality of a group of people who operate according to conventions and practices developed by the group; and on the other, as an indication that this

⁶⁹ General Synod, *Resourcing the Future*, 8, para. 39. (bold emphasis mine)

⁷⁰ Lord Green, *Talent Management for Future Leaders and Leadership Development for Bishops and Deans: A New Approach*, The Archbishops’ Council of the Church of England (Church of England, 2014), 5, para. 11.

⁷¹ Lord Green, *Green Report*, 5, para. 12.

group stands for – professes – a set of transcendent values and principles which derive from a theology of vocation.⁷²

This example highlights the sort of hybrid discourse and ‘complex meshing of religious genres’ that Moberg observes as becoming commonplace within the current ideology and the dominance of new leadership models within the CofE.⁷³ The cumulative effect of this ‘new’ approach is to conflate the ‘conventions and practices’ of managerialism with those of evangelism, so that organisational performance becomes closely associated with, and indicative of, authentic vocational ministry. Lyndon Shakespeare would agree, identifying this use of managerial and organisational terminology as something that continues to emerge in the wake of an ever-declining influence of the church within wider society.⁷⁴ It appears that, based on our understanding of the affective nature of language, the adoption of a new public management (NPM) discourse has become increasingly operant within the church. In questioning NPM as the governing logic of the church, Shakespeare cautions against a wholesale adoption of these strategies, stating:

Some forms of modern ecclesiologies, for example, acquiesce to a reconfiguration of the church that mirrors the modern managed corporation. Such a reconfiguration seeks the future survival of the church through adopting an organizational structure dedicated to a well-marketed and efficient delivery of a product in limited (because privileged) competition with other outlets in the spiritual marketplace.⁷⁵

This mode of competition returns our attention towards a vision of finite resource, whereby the church adopts efficiency and effectiveness as virtues in the service of sustainable growth. This ‘mirroring’ can be seen in the way the RR programme sketches a vision of ecclesial renewal through ‘investment in strategic growth’ that ensures ‘aims are delivered effectively’.⁷⁶

⁷² Lord Green, *Green Report*, 5, para. 13.

⁷³ Moberg, *Church, Market, and Media*, 105–06.

⁷⁴ Shakespeare, *Being the Body of Christ*, 15.

⁷⁵ Shakespeare, *Being the Body of Christ*, 9.

⁷⁶ General Synod, *Resourcing the Future*, §28.

At this point, however, a conceptual distinction is required. The critique advanced here is not directed against management as such. Managing is what any good household will do: attending to resources, coordinating responsibilities, responding to changing needs, and ensuring that common life is sustained. In this sense, management is an ordinary and necessary dimension of ecclesial stewardship. Good management remains attentive to context, responsive to local particularities, and ordered toward enabling the relational and sacramental life of the church.

Managerialism, by contrast, denotes the elevation of managerial technique into a governing rationality. It abstracts practices from their contexts, privileges measurement, efficiency, and scalability, and subjects ecclesial life to the logic of optimisation and control. Where managing seeks to sustain a community, managerialism seeks to standardise and universalise its operations according to predefined targets. The distinction is therefore not merely semantic but theological: good management can create space for care, discernment, and embodied participation, whereas managerialism risks subordinating these goods to performance indicators and strategic outcomes. The question, then, is not whether the CofE should manage its resources, but whether the ideology of growth increasingly shaping its polity permits management to remain a servant of ecclesial life rather than allowing managerial rationality to become its organising principle.

It is precisely this elevation of managerial technique into an organising rationality that becomes visible in the discourse analysed by Shakespeare. Drawing on the work of George Ritzer in his book *The McDonaldization of Society*, Lyndon Shakespeare notes that the ideology of a technique-orientated approach relies on the strategies and rationalised ends of corporate culture, particularly those of efficiency, calculability, predictability and control.⁷⁷ Yet, despite this intentionality, what appears to remain unclear throughout the discourse of

⁷⁷ Shakespeare, *Being the Body of Christ*, 23.

the RR programme is how these new priorities contribute towards (or detract from) what the church actually is or who the church is for. In contrast to the desire for self-fulfilment, prescribed success, and productive ends, the worshipping community in Christ acts as an organising habitus, shaping the people to receive one another in humility, which as Rowan Williams points out: ‘entails the difficult knowledge that my identity as a believer is not my business alone and that I am affected by the failure of another’.⁷⁸ However, explicit theological accounts of failure rarely appear in this discourse of growth, where failure is implicitly configured as something to be overcome rather than as something to be received. Vulnerability, in other words, is not simply absent from the discourse of growth; it is conspicuously displaced, recast as decline to be mitigated, and in so doing, the prevailing narrative of renewal subtly limits those theological resources that would otherwise interpret fragility, dependence, and asymmetry as intrinsic to the church’s faithful embodiment.

Summary

In this chapter section, we have established the methodological framework for the thesis, situating it as an exercise in comparative political theology, grounded in Nancy Eiesland’s symbolic linkage of the church and the disabled body. By elaborating the implications of her work, the thesis aims to render visible the organising logics that shape contemporary church growth discourse, exposing the embedded normative assumptions. Central to this approach is a critique of body representations: the church is neither an idealised nor a uniform body, but a polity shaped through relational interdependence, difference, and contested power. Vulnerability, fragility, and asymmetry are thus constitutive rather than deficient features of ecclesial life, and attention to these dynamics provides a lens through which to critique current models of mission, ministry, and organisational strategy.

⁷⁸ Rowan Williams, “On Being a Human Body,” *Sewanee Theological Review* 42, no. 4 (1999): 411.

Through engagement with a disability hermeneutic, Pauline theology, and the principles of praxis, it is possible to see how critique can be both diagnostic and constructive. Accordingly, structural exclusion is made visible, while the church is reoriented toward practices that sustain relationality, shared vocation, and embodied participation. This is not to replace one ecclesiological model with another, but to resist reifying models as exhaustive or determinative, insisting instead that theological claims about the church remain accountable to ongoing practical judgment and reform within concrete ecclesial life. This methodological stance underpins the conceptual framing that follows, shaping the discussion of ecclesiological models in Chapter 1.3 and the analysis of models of disability in Chapter 3.1. By destabilising claims to theological neutrality or inevitability, this reparatory critique of church growth moves beyond deconstruction toward reimagining ecclesial flourishing through the theological resources disclosed by disability.

Through the Renewal and Reform programme, we have seen how a vision of the efficient and effective church, governed by managerial logics, is increasingly articulated as the preferable and sustainable future of the CofE. As such, this section has approached the RR programme not as a strategy to be evaluated for effectiveness, but as a discursive and symbolic articulation of a particular ecclesial imagination. The ambitions of mission and growth articulated through the RR programme suggest that such a trajectory is already underway, though its implications for ecclesial identity remain uncertain. Within this comparative analysis, growth is shown to function discursively, and once given ideological traction, to hold the potential to reshape ecclesial imagination. Preconfiguring rather than nurturing 'good growth' within the local parish church risks reifying success in narrow terms, instrumentalising mission, and conflating institutional outcomes with divine providence. As a normative theological judgement emerging from this critique, Shakespeare suggests that such a development necessitates prudence:

Christians need to employ caution before accepting too quickly programs and approaches that stipulate a successful way forward through the adoption of methodologies and practices orientated to particular goals that may, under analysis, prove to be at odds with the goals of the church.⁷⁹

It should be noted that critiquing growth strategy is not to reject growth, but instead to interrogate the extent to which managerial hegemony illuminates the positivist drive towards ‘reversing decline’. By doing so, the RR programme infers that decline is causally ‘bad’ for the church. Yet when this assertion is situated within the broader context of the parish church, an ideology of numerical growth becomes somewhat opaque or, at worst, unachievable, leading towards the implicit and corollary narrative of the ‘failing’ church. Incorporating the language of the market is thus not incidental but carries the power to reorient the church’s theological horizon. As Percy observes, this horizon requires continual calibration, stating that: ‘Only when the church is free of imposed ideologies and agendas, can it begin to reclaim an identity as an institution that radically speaks of and embodies God—rather than being consumed by shallower mission and management targets.’⁸⁰

Percy’s caution of ‘being consumed’ highlights the need to distinguish managing from managerialism. As Henry Mintzberg and John Seddon note, managing is the practical, relational work of sustaining a community—attending to people, needs, and local realities.⁸¹ We manage homes, relationships, and responsibilities. Managerialism, by contrast, abstracts these practices into a logic of efficiency, measurement, and control, with the intent of optimisation and universalisation towards prescribed ends. Recognising this distinction clarifies why freedom from imposed managerial ideologies is necessary: only then can the

⁷⁹ Shakespeare, *Being the Body of Christ*, 37.

⁸⁰ Percy, *The Future Shapes of Anglicanism*, 38.

⁸¹ For more on this see: Henry Mintzberg, *Managers Not MBAs: A Hard Look at the Soft Practice of Managing and Management Development*, 1st ed. (San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2005). John Seddon, *Freedom from Command and Control: A Better Way to Make the Work, Work*, 2nd ed. (Buckingham: Vanguard Education, 2005).

church reclaim an identity that embodies God's purposes rather than being captured by abstract, target-driven logics (an idea we will explore further in the next chapter).

By establishing this critical framework—anchored in disability hermeneutics, comparative political theology—this section has set the stage for the subsequent analysis of mission and the ideology of growth. The methodology ensures that strategic initiatives, institutional priorities, and growth discourse are evaluated not merely as neutral tools but as forces that shape the embodied, relational, and political reality of the contemporary church.

In the section that follows, we will explore this mode of embodiment by focusing on the contested notion of 'good growth' and the ways normative targets are embedded within ecclesial governance through the Church Growth Movement. In contrast to models that idealise the church as lean, fit, and self-sufficient, I will propose a disability-informed hermeneutic that foregrounds interdependence, vulnerability, and care—offering a counter-vision that resists the over-prioritisation of growth and measurable outcomes.

1.3

Keeping up and keeping fit: *Embodying visions of 'good growth'*

I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.

1 Corinthians 3.6-7

Introduction

In the first section of this chapter, we explored the origins of diminishing church attendance in England and Wales since the late-eighteenth century (noting some exceptions) that, by the late 1980s, gave way to the legitimisation crisis of declining attendance within the Church of England. By continuing to trace this narrative within the established church through the late 1990s and into the new millennium, a picture begins to emerge of a sequence of demand-led responses that came to serve as the catalyst for what would eventually become the *Renewal and Reform* programme launched by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York in 2015. This was a bold undertaking in the pursuit of growth for the Church of England and one that, in many ways, was much needed. However, it is salient at this point to consider the question that appears to go unanswered in this and other growth-orientated strategies, namely: Is all growth good growth? churches with life and health reflect social cohesion and are a sign of God's abundant grace, so whilst growth may be one signifier of a healthy church, what belies the impulse that churches should only ever grow rather than decline? At first, this question may seem axiomatic, but the intelligibility of growth has, in many ways, slowly drifted from any theological anchoring, giving way to an ecclesial vision typically characterised by neoliberal market logic.

Within this contemporary socio-economic climate, the Church of England increasingly operates under conditions in which growth is framed less as the organic outworking of faithful witness and more as an institutional necessity. This growth imperative—shaped by the competitive, expansionist logic of neoliberal capitalism—has been absorbed into the church’s strategic vocabulary, with vitality frequently measured through quantitative metrics and managerial targets. Whilst it may be unintentional, this reorientation risks aligning ecclesial identity with utilitarian priorities and recasting mission as a form of productivity or optimisation. Yet this framework not only constrains theological imagination but also embeds normative assumptions about capacity, efficiency, and success that may implicitly marginalise those whose participation resists such metrics—particularly those whose lives are marked by the label ‘disabled’. The privileging of autonomy, growth, and visible impact stands in tension with the biblical vision of the church as a body whose members flourish through mutual dependence and the valuing of difference. Central to this is questioning the analogous use of ‘the body of Christ’ in describing a church facing decline. In turn, this raises an interesting question, namely, when we think of a body, what kind of body are we thinking of? The limits of a body and the extent to which notions of the body—as being preferably young, healthy, and fit—are thus reified through growth strategies as the ‘successful’ church, calling into question what ‘success’ really means.

Accordingly, this section interrogates the theological and ecclesiological assumptions that render growth normative within the Church of England. It analyses how particular models of the church shape what counts as faithfulness and flourishing, before tracing how these imaginaries are operationalised through the Church Growth Movement and the Renewal and Reform programme. Placing these developments alongside the counter-visions of Karl Barth, Lesslie Newbigin, Martyn Percy, and John Fitzmaurice, the chapter clarifies the rival accounts of embodiment and ecclesial purpose at stake, thereby preparing

the ground for the next chapter's development of a hermeneutic of disability as a critical lens for reimagining 'good growth'.

The growth imperative

In a neoliberal society defined by competition, success, and perpetual expansion, the church is likewise subject to the same pressures and growth imperatives—the structural demand for continual increase to preserve stability and avert decline. Alignment with prevailing narratives of mobility and gain thus situates the church within a competitive spiritual marketplace, intensifying pressures to expand, secure financial sustainability, retain social relevance, and compete for congregational growth within a culture where religious and spiritual affiliation has become increasingly fluid. This imperative for growth is further reinforced by bishops, who position it not merely as a pragmatic necessity but as a missional obligation of the church and its members. Moreover, in parallel with economic models that emphasise capital accumulation as a means of ensuring long-term sustainability, dioceses rely on growth to generate financial resources, maintain operational infrastructures, and invest in strategic programmes. Within this narrative, the absence of sustained attendance exposes the church to demographic stagnation, declining social engagement, and institutional obsolescence, mirroring the broader consequences of low-growth economies within neoliberal frameworks. Essentially, it is the acquiescence of a narrative of decline. Consequently, church growth is not merely an organic social phenomenon, but an institutional imperative shaped by economic imperatives and the broader organising logic of a growth-oriented society.

As noted in the previous section, Charles Taylor's 'expressivist outlook' ensures that this same cultural pressure operates under the influence of wealth generation and goods acquisition. Growth becomes the all-important metric and the means to reify capitalistic values—such as prudence, efficiency, and choice—that employ pragmatism as the means

towards desired profit and gain. Whether measuring churches based on their finances or the number of congregants, the utilitarianism of John Stewart Mill, Jeremy Bentham, and Peter Singer unquestionably permeates current funding streams and organising logic of the Church of England (CofE). In response, a central concern of this thesis is to examine the extent to which these methodologies risk reshaping (or deforming) the ecclesial horizon of the CofE. The theological concern here is not with growth per se, nor with the hope that the Gospel might bear visible fruit; both, rightly understood, belong to the work of the Holy Spirit. Rather, the difficulty arises when growth shifts from being one possible expression of faithfulness to becoming the governing telos by which faithfulness itself is measured. In this configuration, numerical increase, scalability, and sustainability begin to function as normative criteria of ecclesial legitimacy, subtly reordering the church's self-understanding.

Such a shift is not merely strategic but ontological. It risks displacing a cruciform ecclesiology—one grounded in Pauline body theology, in which weakness, dependency, and asymmetry are not deficits to be corrected but intrinsic to the church's participation in Christ.

To be clear, the aim is not to reject growth outright, but to subject it to theological judgment by asking which account of embodiment it privileges. In doing so, the thesis advances a critical ecclesiology rooted in the conviction that the church's faithfulness is disclosed not through perfection or performance, but through its capacity to remain a communion marked by difference, dependence, and faith in Christ. Growth, where it occurs, must therefore be received as gift and discerned within this theological horizon, rather than mark its boundaries.

Mission and the ideology of growth

This critique deepens when the church is approached as a formative polity whose identity is learned through embodied participation rather than abstract modelling. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's account of *habitus*, David Ford argues that eucharistic communities are constituted through a 'complex and contested ecology of practices', shaped by historical sedimentation and asymmetrical power relations. Accordingly, ecclesial life involves 'mutual adjustments' through practices of boundary-crossing and collective decision-making (and division).⁸² The church is always constituted through overt and covert dynamics of power, negotiation, and contestation. Ford's account thus reinforces Eiesland's claim that the Body of Christ cannot be reduced to an idealised or functional whole. Ecclesial embodiment is historically situated and sustained through negotiation rather than structural coherence. The church is not a perfected organism but a fragile communion.

From this perspective, growth-oriented strategies risk misrepresenting ecclesial reality when they rely on modelling or abstraction. As Ford explicitly cautions, 'the act of consciously adverting to an activity can distort it', and that giving an account of practice can 'freeze' it, distancing it from its temporal and relational context.⁸³ Hence, when managerial priorities begin to frame ecclesial life, its dynamic and negotiated character is recast as a set of discrete elements available for reorganisation towards predetermined ends. Such abstraction privileges forms of productive participation while marginalising bodies marked by fragility, slowness, or resistance to exacting standardisation. A hermeneutic of disability exposes this dynamic by asking which forms of embodiment are treated as normative within such accounts of the church, and which are quietly rendered dispensable.

⁸² David Ford, *Self and Salvation: Being Transformed* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 143.

⁸³ Ford, *Self and Salvation*, 143.

Anchored in Pauline body theology, this methodological approach resists triumphalist or functionalist accounts of the church. In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul's body metaphor reorders value by centring those members deemed weaker or less honourable. In comparison, in 2 Corinthians 12, divine power is disclosed not in strength or optimisation but in weakness that resists mastery. Read through a hermeneutic of disability, informed by Nancy Eiesland's symbolic linkage between disability and divine embodiment, these texts sustain an ecclesiology in which vulnerability is not a deficit to be overcome but a site of theological disclosure. The methodology developed here, therefore, proceeds through sustained comparison between Pauline body theology and managerial or functionalist construal of the ecclesial body.

The contemporary emphasis on growth as a metric for success presents a challenge to the ecclesiology of the CofE. If market-driven frameworks become uncritically adopted, mission is soon aligned to a utilitarian calculus, prioritising material outcomes over theological fidelity. That is not to say that growth should not be intentional or desirable, but while financial viability and congregational numbers are practical concerns, an overreliance on such indicators may obscure deeper ecclesiological questions about the nature of the church's witness and purpose. The danger lies not merely in numerical decline but in the potential erosion of a theological vision that comprehends growth in terms beyond statistical modelling. The extent to which these pressures shape ecclesial decision-making then raises critical questions about the theological integrity of church growth strategies and their unintended consequences. It is within this context that Karl Barth's critique of 'extensive' growth (measurable outcomes) becomes particularly relevant, offering a counterbalance to begin reorienting the conversation towards an alternative vision of ecclesial flourishing.

In contrast to the contemporary growth imperative of the Church of England, Barth asserts that the 'intensive life' of the church, its life of prayer, worship, and devotion, should

have no such telos. He contends that the intensive life should instead encourage and build up the people of God, avoiding the reductive lure of ‘extensive’ outcomes. He states:

The true growth which is the secret of the upbuilding of the community is not extensive but intensive; its vertical growth in height and depth [...] It is not the case that its intensive increase necessarily involves an extensive. We cannot, therefore, strive for vertical renewal merely to produce greater horizontal extension and a wider audience [...] If it [the church and its mission] is used only as a means of extensive renewal, the internal will at once lose its meaning and power. It can be fulfilled only for its own sake, and then—unplanned and unarranged—it will bear its own fruits.⁸⁴

This intensive–extensive dynamic may seem idealistic, but what Barth is calling for is a realistic assessment of the patterns and practices that make the church the church, namely, to glorify God and faithfully follow Jesus Christ. Accordingly, this faithfulness must be sought for its intrinsic value rather than as a means to achieve other ends, namely, measurable outcomes. According to Barth, when the church prioritises extensive growth over its intensive renewal, it risks undermining the very foundation of its identity and mission, forfeiting its authentic power and purpose. The ‘true growth’ that Barth highlights is characterised by a vertical dimension—its height and depth in communion with God—that does not organise in anticipation of extensive outcomes (such as numerical growth) and should not form part of any ecclesiology. Or to put it more simply, worship is not an instrument of the market. An honest account of how the CofE has declined in numerical attendance cannot, therefore, merely be a matter of developing increasingly sophisticated data analysis to track and trace the ‘symptoms’. Rather, it should address the underlying cause by interrogating the telos of current strategies and reimagining them within an organising logic that springs from the church’s own theological vocation—rather than capitulating to the market’s restless appetite for what can be counted, optimised, and gained.

If growth has become the measure of faithfulness, then we must ask what vision of the church renders this intelligible. The language of the ‘body of Christ’ is not self-explanatory;

⁸⁴ Karl Barth, *The Church Dogmatics*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. G. W. Bromiley, 2nd ed., 14 vols., vol. IV.2, *The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1958; repr., 1st Paperback), 648.

it carries assumptions about health, coherence, and purpose. Models do more than describe the church—they shape what counts as flourishing within it. Whether conceived as an institution, organism, mechanism, or communion, each model privileges certain forms of life while marginalising others. Clarifying these competing ecclesial imaginaries, therefore, helps explain how particular accounts of ‘good growth’ gain authority, and what they quietly leave aside.

Models of the church

Within modern ecclesiology, Avery Dulles’s typology in *Models of the church* has become a significant point of reference. His six paradigms—institution, mystical communion, sacrament, herald, servant, and (latterly) community of disciples—are designed to capture different dimensions of the church’s theological identity and relation to the world.⁸⁵ Dulles does not present these as mutually exclusive or exhaustive, but as complementary models through which the church may understand itself. He thus concludes that none of the models, therefore, ‘should be interpreted in an exclusive sense, so as to negate what the other approved models have to teach us.’⁸⁶ Yet despite his cautions, the typological structure risks rendering the church as knowable through comparative abstraction, subtly inviting a ‘diagnostic’ approach to the body of Christ.

Through a more empirically grounded and contextually sensitive set of models, James Hopewell’s work in *Congregation: Stories and Structures* is rooted in the practical realities of grounded congregational life. Drawing on cultural anthropology and ethnography, Hopewell uses the motif of ‘house hunting’ to present four interpretive lenses—contextual, mechanistic, organic, and symbolic—through which to view the realities and life of the local

⁸⁵ Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church*, Extended ed. (New York: Image Books, 2002), 185–87.

⁸⁶ Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 24.

church.⁸⁷ He notes that whilst all four postures exist in any given church, one will always tend to dominate. While Dulles essentially asks *what* the church is, Hopewell asks *how* the church is narrated and embodied in specific places.

First among these is the *contextual* model, which focuses on the church's relationship to its local environment in response to prevailing demographic, economic, and sociopolitical pressures. Here, the congregation adopts a missional posture that views the church less as a cloistered community and more as a web of interconnected relationships shaped by the needs of the world. This reversal of focus, from the outside in, asserts that in much the same way that faith should be known through the lived witness of its individual members, 'local churches should live not for themselves but for service to their neighbours in crisis.'⁸⁸ Effective mission is therefore not based on the assumption that the church needs to grow, *per se*, but rather on an ethic of kenotic service. The *mechanistic* model, by contrast, is driven by a logic of efficiency, effectiveness, and growth-oriented outcomes. Here, growth and efficiency become primary; the church is treated as a system measurable through institutional outputs as a 'mechanism with the capacity for greater or lesser efficiency in doing the work of God.'⁸⁹ In its more extreme form, process eclipses people.

In a shift from structure to relationship, the *organic* model envisions the church as a living organism whose identity persists amid contextual change. It prioritises relational and spiritual maturation over functional efficiency, embracing communal integration and mutual care rather than mechanistic rationalisation. Renewal and the potential for growth arise from within the church through ongoing participation in shared life.

⁸⁷ James F. Hopewell, *Congregation: Stories and Structures*, ed. Barbara G. Wheeler (London: SCM Press, 1988), 19.

⁸⁸ Hopewell, *Congregation*, 22.

⁸⁹ Hopewell, *Congregation*, 24.

Finally, the most distinctive of Hopewell's schemes is the *symbolic* model, which he himself privileges. In this view, the congregation becomes 'less a texture or machine or organism than a discourse, an exchange of symbols that express the views, values, and motivations of the parish.'⁹⁰ He likens this model to the response of a family discovering a potential new home, declaring, 'this house is us!', noting that they are speaking symbolically rather than literally. Similarly, Hopewell suggests that a congregation's sense of recognition and belonging emerges through shared meaning systems embedded in their liturgical and social life.⁹¹

From this brief overview, we can see that Hopewell's contribution builds upon Dulles' scheme by grounding ecclesiology in the lived reality of congregations rather than heuristic blueprints. Where Dulles offers theological abstraction, Hopewell offers what Clifford Geertz would ethnographically refer to as 'thick description' interpreting not just the actions, but the cultural meanings, symbols, and intentions behind them.⁹² Yet both share a critical assumption: that the church can be understood through models, that its identity is something accessible to analytical reasoning and classifiable according to typologies. It is precisely this assumption that Nicholas Healy critiques.

In *Church, World and the Christian Life*, Healy challenges the dominance of what he calls a 'blueprint ecclesiology', the positivist assertions that seek to define, contain, or prescribe the church's identity through abstract systems. He observes: 'Those who want to insist that their model is the supermodel could counter it by arguing that the inadequacies of other models are not present in the one they have selected and developed.'⁹³ For Healy,

⁹⁰ Hopewell, *Congregation*, 28.

⁹¹ Hopewell, *Congregation*, 20.

⁹² Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, 2000 Edition ed. (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 27.

⁹³ Nicholas M. Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 32.

the supermodel reveals not only a competitive rationalism but a deeper theological failing to account for the dynamic, participatory, and storied nature of the local church's authentic identity. As such, church identity is not something given in a static form, nor is it recoverable through typologies; rather, it is something lived through God's grace. His concern is that 'the identity of the concrete church is not simply given; it is constructed and ever reconstructed by the grace-enabled activities of its members as they embody the church's practices, beliefs and valuations.'⁹⁴ In this light, Hopewell's *symbolic* type is as close as any model comes to a reading of the church.

In response, Healy reframes an ecclesiology that draws inspiration from Hans Urs von Balthasar, positioning the church as a participant in the *theodrama* of salvation. Called by the Holy Spirit, the church responds by participating in the Gospel through worship, witness, and faithful improvisation. Ecclesiological reflection, therefore, is not guided by the criteria of performance, universality, or institutional coherence, but by faithfulness to a cruciform life. As he states:

[T]heodramatic ecclesiology is not governed by the blueprint criteria of completeness, normativity, universal application and systematic coherence. Rather, it is judged by how well it promotes the church's practical coherence with the principle laid down by Paul, that the church boast in the Cross of Jesus Christ, and only in the Cross.⁹⁵

This Christological reframing challenges both Dulles's ecclesiological typologies and Hopewell's cultural models. While both offer interpretive clarity, Healy insists that the true test of ecclesiology lies in its capacity to foster cruciform discipleship and a faithful witness to Christ, grounded in the local context. It is not enough to describe what churches are or even what they believe themselves to be; ecclesiology must attend to what they *do* in the unfolding narrative of God's redemption. In this way, Healy pushes beyond the hegemonic modes of normative ecclesiology, which he cautions are 'governed by an abstract,

⁹⁴ Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life*, 5.

⁹⁵ Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life*, 76.

rationalistic and overly theoretical approach' that risks becoming 'misguided if it attempts to construct, on the basis of a single model or principle, a systematic blueprint for the church that applies normatively always and everywhere'.⁹⁶ Healy thus offers not another model but a change of posture—narrative, contextual, and improvisational—positioning the church within an Augustinian framework of being both 'pilgrim' (earthly) and 'triumphant' (heavenly).⁹⁷ This expanded theodramatic perspective opens the possibility of engaging other modes of enquiry without reverting to blueprint normativity. As Martyn Percy similarly argues, 'ecclesiology must make full use of non-theological methods and insights, which will help the church to think of itself as an organisation, as well as a "text" that is read and expressed'.⁹⁸ In this way, a theodramatic horizon opens a path for disability studies to inform and animate a Christological account of the disabled body as constitutive of the church, without simply introducing yet another competing model.

Seen in this light, the contemporary preoccupation with what the RR programme considers 'good growth' can be read not simply as a strategy, but as the outworking of a particular ecclesial proclivity—one that risks the reductive force of the blueprint that Healy cautions against. The issue, therefore, is not growth as such, but the model of the church that renders growth both normative and measurable. If models of the church shape what counts as ecclesial flourishing, cultural models of the human body likewise shape what counts as health and participation. This comparative dynamic will be developed more fully in Chapter 3.1 through an examination of models of disability and their implications for ecclesial imagination. Before developing this comparison, it is first necessary to examine

⁹⁶ Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life*, 50.

⁹⁷ Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life*, 151.

⁹⁸ Martyn Percy, *Engaging with Contemporary Culture: Christianity, Theology and the Concrete Church*, ed. Leslie J. Francis and Jeff Astley, *Explorations in Practical, Pastoral and Empirical Theology*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 8.

how models of the church have shaped contemporary understandings of ‘good growth’ within the Church of England.

‘Good growth’ and the rise of the Church Growth Movement

One of the primary ‘symptomatic’ responses to numerical decline in the Church of England has been the adoption of the organising logic of church-growth strategies that promote contextual, strategic, and pragmatic solutions to declining congregations. Proponents of this approach contend that church expansion is both evidence of vitality and a necessary means of fulfilling ‘The Great Commission’ to ‘go and make disciples’ (Matthew 28.16–20). Yet these methodologies—shaped by market-oriented efficiency, data analytics, and targeted outreach—invite further scrutiny, as they risk drifting towards a positivist framework that prioritises extensive growth over the church’s deeper calling to live as God’s redeemed community, the body of Christ.

As we saw in the previous section, use of the term ‘good growth’ within the *Renewal and Reform* (RR) programme is framed as a theological imperative defined by the convergence of both numerical and spiritual multiplication. Yet as Percy cautions, ‘growth can easily be confused with multiplication.’⁹⁹ Regardless, measurable outcomes become a key part of assessing what makes growth ‘good’, within the RR programme, evaluated through desirable results in mission and growth, which the ‘Resourcing the Future’ report codifies by explicitly linking calculated outcomes to investment funding. As it states, ‘we believe that the funding for proactive investment in growth opportunities should be explicitly linked to dioceses’ plans for mission and growth, and in a way that encourages evaluation of outcomes, sustainability and shared learning.’¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ Martyn Percy, *The Ecclesial Canopy: Faith, Hope, Charity* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 20.

¹⁰⁰ General Synod, *Resourcing the Future*, 8, para. 37.

Whilst plans for mission and growth remain explicit, what remains implicit is an anthropology of managerialism that emphasises a materialist view of the church found within organisational theory. In this way, managerialism likens organisations to mechanistic bodies—functional but lacking holistic unity—prioritising efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control. The church becomes best understood through rationalisation and efficient coordination, with a focus on survival and growth. These assumptions align with managerial practices, including strategic planning, leadership models, and programmatic approaches emerging in mid-twentieth-century Western evangelical ecclesiology.

Distinct amongst these approaches and of most significant influence is the Church Growth Movement mentioned above, which adopts a distinctly pragmatic approach, incorporating techniques from disciplines such as business, marketing, and sociology to achieve its objective of increasing congregational size. Central to its mission is the goal of enabling churches to fulfil their evangelistic and discipleship objectives more ‘effectively’.

Emerging in the mid-twentieth century amid decolonisation and Western secularisation, the Church Growth Movement (CGM), under the leadership of Donald McGavran and later C. Peter Wagner, developed a pragmatic and data-driven approach to mission. Drawing on sociology, marketing, and organisational theory, it sought to identify the conditions under which churches could most effectively multiply. Growth was framed not as incidental but as the normal and expected state of the church.

For McGavran, ‘multiplying churches was not only biblical but strategic’, emphasising that ‘only as the church grows can it bring greater glory to God’.¹⁰¹ Accordingly, it would appear that this ‘good growth’ was essential as the reification of faithful Christian witness.

¹⁰¹ Donald A. McGavran, *The Bridges of God: A Study in the Strategy of Missions* (London: World Dominion Press, 1955), 37.

What makes the CGM of particular interest to ecclesiology is that, rather than being a mere theory, the praxis of the movement was forged and perfected in the crucible of evangelical mission. Under these terms, Wagner emphasises that ‘if we concentrate on church growth, we get to the heart of the Great Commission’.¹⁰² From the outset, it seeks to concretise results within the church. Given that the methodologies of the *Renewal and Reform* programme follow much of this same logic, it is therefore essential to understand how the praxis of the CGM manifests itself within the ecclesiology of the Church of England.

Despite the CofE asserting itself as a ‘church for the whole nation’, one of McGavran’s central missiological assertions was that ‘people like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic or class barriers’.¹⁰³ Rather than being intentionally diverse and open to all, the social anthropology behind this assertion is one that seeks a monolithic culture and people group. There is also something of an over-generalisation in McGavran’s use of the term ‘people’, which remains undefined. Still, it is clear that tracing church growth methodologies and literature from the early 1980s onward, it becomes increasingly focused on the strategic and pragmatic means of achieving numerical growth as a meaningful goal, regardless of who is left out. As Wagner himself contends:

church growth is that science which investigates the planting, multiplication, function and health of Christian churches as they relate specifically to the effective implementation of God’s commission to “make disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28:19-20 RSV). church growth strives to combine the eternal theological principles of God’s Word concerning the expansion of the church with the best insights of contemporary social and behavioral sciences, employing as its initial frame of reference, the foundational work done by Donald McGavran.¹⁰⁴

Here, Wagner’s description of church growth as a ‘science’ signals a positivist confidence in method, fusing evangelical pragmatism with organisational rationalism. At best, this seeks

¹⁰² C. Peter Wagner, *Strategies for Church Growth: Tools for Effective Mission and Evangelism* (California: Regal Books, 1989), 35.

¹⁰³ Stephen Cottrell, *Simpler, Humbler, Bolder*, Church of England (General Synod, 2021), 4; Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, ed. C. Peter Wagner, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990, 1990), 163.

¹⁰⁴ C. Peter Wagner, *Church Growth and the Whole Gospel: A Biblical Mandate* (New York: Harper and Row, 1981), 75.

replicable fruitfulness; at worst, it consecrates technique as the operative agent of growth, subtly displacing grace.

Echoing RR's use of the scripture highlighted in the previous section: 'The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few' (Matt 9.37), strategy and systematisation are mainstays within church growth practices that rely upon intentionality (defined as 'goals') and positive outcomes framed within the missional task of evangelism.¹⁰⁵ Mathew Guest observes this extensive dynamic as being commonplace amongst Western evangelicals, keen to engage contemporary culture and ensure the Gospel is conveyed in meaningful ways. He attributes this approach to the 'deeply engrained missionary pragmatism which lies at the heart of evangelical identity'.¹⁰⁶ A sentiment maintained by McGavran's reading of the Great Commission that frames the atoning sacrifice of Jesus as being 'pragmatic enough to do what was necessary'.¹⁰⁷ Accordingly, Wagner views all church activity (preaching, witnessing, sending, and forgiving sins) as secondary, serving only as the 'means toward the end of making disciples'.¹⁰⁸ But who are the disciples that McGavran intends to make in this way? What is the good growth that CGM seeks to achieve?

Central to CGM methodology is McGavran's Homogeneous Unit Principle (HUP), which argues that people are more likely to become Christians within culturally and socially similar groups.¹⁰⁹ While intended as a missiological strategy, this principle risks embedding homogeneity into the ecclesiological DNA of a congregation. Even if diversity is sought later, the initial logic of 'like attracts like' shapes the community's self-understanding and boundaries. As David Bosch cautions, such methodological prioritisation can lead to

¹⁰⁵ Nye, "A Vision and Narrative for Renewal and Reform." §2.

¹⁰⁶ Matthew Guest, *Evangelical Identity and Contemporary Culture: A Congregational Study in Innovation*, ed. David Bebbington et al., Studies in Evangelical History and Thought, (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2007), 163.

¹⁰⁷ Wagner, *Strategies for Church Growth: Tools for Effective Mission and Evangelism*, 46.

¹⁰⁸ Wagner, *Strategies for Church Growth: Tools for Effective Mission and Evangelism*, 50.

¹⁰⁹ McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 69–71.

mechanistic and reductionist approaches to mission. Furthermore, the movement's pragmatic and market-driven strategies also raise concerns about the commodification of religion, with missiologist David Bosch cautioning the CGM's extensive focus on methodology risks leading the church towards 'mechanistic and reductionist approaches to mission'.¹¹⁰

It might be tempting to confine these methodologies to the past, framing them within the misplaced aspirations of a bygone era. Yet, the contemporary literature on church growth reveals much of the same missiology, reliant on rhetoric and discourse that promotes a selective and narrowing form of Christianity. An example of this can be seen in the inception of 'The Gregory Centre for church Multiplication' (or CCX) in 2015 by the Bishop of Islington, The Rt Revd Dr Ric Thorpe, to achieve the Diocese of London's goal of creating one hundred new worshipping communities and to promote church planting more broadly across the CofE. Throughout their published literature, online programmes, and training courses, there is a clear link in language to the CGM and a managerial discourse with technocratic terminology such as 'local leaders', 'operating model', and 'cross-functional hub', eclipsing any reference to church polity or theology. On the website, the page dedicated to church growth states that 'growth isn't measured only in numbers, but in depth and impact; our growth training reflects this rounded approach.'¹¹¹ Despite not being interested 'only in numbers', they further assert that: 'The church is seeking innovation in spiritual formation and disciple-making—disciples that make disciples, growth that multiplies.'¹¹²

¹¹⁰ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, The American Society of Missiology Series, (New York: Orbis Books, 1991; repr., 24), 375.

¹¹¹ "Church Growth," The Gregory Centre for Church Multiplication, 2025, accessed 2 February, 2025, <https://ccx.org.uk/growing>.

¹¹² "Multiply 2025: Multiplying Missionary Disciples," The Gregory Centre for Church Multiplication, 2025, accessed 3 February, 2025, <https://ccx.org.uk/multiply/>.

Towards this end, CCX hosts annual conferences on church growth and as part of the ‘Multiply 2025’ conference, CCX commissioned the UK-based research organisation, *Eido Research*—who specialise in qualitative and quantitative analysis—to guide proceedings and ‘equip’ delegates through ‘lessons from the latest research and insights from frontline practitioners, sharing tools that can shape our churches for the spiritual formation of missionary disciples.’¹¹³ What these ‘tools’ are is unclear, but in the technologisation of language associated with market-driven logic, it is evident that the very framing of mission is being recast in managerial and instrumental terms, privileging techniques of optimisation over the slower, relational work of cultivating a faithful ecclesial community.

This approach emphasises power—whether in God, the church, or individuals—and the organisational mechanisms that seek and communicate that power. While affirming certain truths, it denies other fundamental theological realities, making it analogous to a classical heresy of *Pelagianism*—asserting that growth is primarily the result of human agency, strategy, and efficiency—rather than God’s salvific grace. Whilst this perspective appears to address real needs, anxieties, and crises by presenting Christianity as a functional solution to individual and societal problems, it reduces mission to a pathological process of healing and fixing. Its appeal lies in its partial correctness, as it rightly identifies the Gospel’s relevance to human pain and need, but it ultimately distorts the holistic nature of Christian mission and communication. As Percy most definitively highlights, there is a seduction in the partial truth of the situation and yet:

The flaw lies in the fact that it ties God into an axiomatic relationship with the world, in which God’s communication and being centre on personal or corporate problem-solving activity. It fails to acknowledge God’s freedom inside and outside creation, inside and outside the church, as well as inside and outside invented or perceived axioms. In short, it fails to acknowledge God’s total abundance and dynamism, and the centrality of the missiological approach shifts quickly and imperceptibly from being dynamically theocentric to being problem-centred. That is to say, the identity of God becomes too linked to limitations or problems, and therefore limited. What

¹¹³ CCX, “Multiply 2025: Multiplying Missionary Disciples.”

needs to be appreciated is that God is already ahead of all evangelism, mission and church growth.¹¹⁴

Percy concludes that God's abundance far surpasses all the principles, pragmatic strategies, and power-driven paradigms promoted by church growth proponents, and as such, reveals that the church growth imperative aligns more with the agenda and strategies of capitalism and consumerism than it does with the grace and mercy of God. Despite these obvious concerns, the appeal of solutions-based growth remains prevalent in the Church of England and no more so than within the RR programme.

Further to this assessment, within the ideology of growth, faithfulness itself risks being reframed through this same market logic, where the value of witness is assessed primarily by its productive yield in conversions, rendering growth not simply a fruit of discipleship but the principal proof of it. As McGavran states: 'Church Growth follows where Christians show faithfulness in finding the lost'.¹¹⁵ By implication and within these terms, does McGavran mean to propose that any lack of growth is, therefore, a product of an unfaithful church? It would seem so, as he continues: 'Faithfulness in proclamation and finding is not enough. There must be faithful aftercare. Among the found, also, there must be fidelity in feeding on the word. Quality goes hand in hand with quantity.'¹¹⁶ The use of terms such as 'quality' and 'quantity' reveal a utilitarian calculus, where growth is measured within an economic framework, that implicitly affirms the larger the congregation the greater the faithfulness of its people, evoking what Percy terms a 'doctrine of assurance', where by the vitality and health of a church is demonstrated in quantifiable, numerical terms.¹¹⁷ Wagner is clear to stress this, stating that: 'A person's commitment to Christ may

¹¹⁴ Martyn Percy, "Your Church Can Grow!": A Contextual Theological Critique of Megachurches," in *Handbook of Megachurches*, ed. Stephen Hunt (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 113–14.

¹¹⁵ McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 5.

¹¹⁶ McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 6.

¹¹⁷ Martyn Percy, *Words, Wonders and Power: Understanding Contemporary Christian Fundamentalism and Revivalism* (London: SPCK, 1996), 109.

be invisible, but the same person's commitment to the Body of Christ is visible and measurable. The two commitments should not be separated'.¹¹⁸ Or, to put it another way, if commitment cannot be measured or quantified, it does not exist. Thus, any ecclesial practice that lacks the semiotics of growth runs the risk of being cast aside in favour of those that do. Ultimately, this pragmatic shaping of ecclesiology aligns with market principles in the promotion of activities that yield tangible and positive outcomes as a measure of the favour and activity of God.

Compounding the issue is that calculable growth can, at times, appear to be elevated to an apotheosis. Arguably, the most prescient critique of this form of missiological vision comes from Lesslie Newbigin, which is worth citing in full:

Modern capitalism has created a world totally different from anything known before. Previous ages have assumed that resources are limited and that economics—housekeeping—is about how to distribute them fairly. Since Adam Smith, we have learned to assume that exponential growth is the basic law of economics and that no limits can be set to it. The result is that increased production has become an end in itself; products are designed to become rapidly obsolete so as to make room for more production; a minority is ceaselessly urged to multiply its wants in order to keep the process going while the majority lacks the basic necessities for existence; and the whole ecosystem upon which human life depends is threatened with destruction. Growth is for the sake of growth and is not determined by any overarching social purpose. And that, of course, is an exact account of the phenomenon which, when it occurs in the human body, is called cancer. In the long perspective of history, it would be difficult to deny that the exuberant capitalism of the past 250 years will be diagnosed in the future as a desperately dangerous case of cancer in the body of human society—if indeed this cancer has not been terminal and there are actually survivors around to make the diagnosis.¹¹⁹

The 'dangerous cancer' Newbigin identifies lies at the heart of the critique levelled at the CGM. Rather than adopting an anti-growth stance—as if 'small is beautiful'—the concern here is with a vision of human flourishing shaped by entrepreneurial and market logics, in which 'growth for its own sake' becomes the dominant orientation of ecclesial life, and managerialism the organising logic driving numerical growth. This comes down to what 'good' growth looks like within the context of the church.

¹¹⁸ Wagner, *Strategies for Church Growth: Tools for Effective Mission and Evangelism*, 54.

¹¹⁹ Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (London: SPCK, 1986), 114.

In contrast, a vision of growth as the ‘upbuilding’ of the church: embryo to adult, seed to plant, all take time and, if ‘good’, only ever reach their predetermined state. As Barth notes, in biological terms, growth is bound within the nature of the species. Whilst he sees the church holding ‘an astonishing capacity [for] numerical increase’, this increase is reliant on the will of God.¹²⁰ Or to put this in Newbigin’s terms, growth without limit is death. That is not to say intentionality or the managing of resources and skills is not important, but as Barth asserts, when it comes to church growth, ‘human planning and speech and faith and love and decision and action are also involved’.¹²¹ Further to this, he asserts: ‘The communion of saints shows itself to be fruitful in the mere fact that as it exists it enlarges its own circle and constituency in the world. It produces new saints by whose entry it is enlarged and increased.’¹²²

It is interesting to note how Barth’s view dovetails with the emphasis on the Great Commission and strategies advocated within church growth circles that seemingly consecrate pragmatism as the operational mode of the church. Yet as Barth asserts, growth is primarily a work of the Holy Spirit. So how might the relational and structural interdependence of individuals within the Church of England resist programmes of pragmatism in search of the growth that Barth sees as being fruitful in the Spirit? In response, Barth would assert that the church can only be considered a genuine form of the church when a generative ‘upbuilding as a community’ occurs between its members.¹²³ Barth’s account of ‘upbuilding’ also opens space for contrasting a care-based logic of organising with the market-driven logic that often underpins much of the church growth discourse. Whereas a market logic privileges efficiency, competition, and the production of measurable outcomes, a care-based logic emphasises the sustaining of relationships, mutual

¹²⁰ Barth, *CD IV/2*, IV.2, 645.

¹²¹ Barth, *CD IV/2*, IV.2, 644.

¹²² Barth, *CD IV/2*, IV.2, 645.

¹²³ Barth, *CD IV/2*, IV.2, 641.

responsibility, and the interdependence through which the body of Christ is nurtured. This is what Barth asserts is the ‘true church’.¹²⁴ In this latter frame, growth is not the unlimited pursuit of more, but the maturation of a community’s shared life, marked by trust, attentiveness, and reciprocity. Such a vision reframes fruitfulness away from market-led metrics and towards the cultivation of conditions in which all members can participate in, and contribute to, the flourishing of the whole—a theme that will be explored more fully in Chapter Five.

Tracing this tension between gaining and simply being, John Fitzmaurice identifies what he deems a problematic fixation of the contemporary church. Instead, he advocates for a theological renewal of goodness, holiness, and faithfulness. Key to his assessment is the failure of the church to act within the public interest. At the heart of his argument is the assertion that the Gospel is not reducible to statistics; the true nature of the church is found in its faithfulness to God’s mission, not in its ability to count and quantify success. Critiquing church growth strategies as the response to rising secularism, Fitzmaurice states that:

Such a strategy seeks not the resurrection of the church within a post-Christendom era, but rather the resuscitation of its numerical strength and the recapturing of past positions of power and influence. It has been my contention that this growth model has failed not only the church but wider society as well, as is evidenced in the financial, political/democratic and social crises that Great Britain finds itself in at the beginning of the second decade of the second millennium AD. What’s more I would suggest that such an approach risks fundamentally damaging the integrity of the church by drawing its focus away from its primary tasks. In the final analysis the Gospel simply does not lend itself to numerical and statistical auditing—it is time to start measuring what is valuable rather than simply valuing what is measurable. The quantitative must not be valued at the expense of the qualitative.¹²⁵

In short, attempts to restore the church’s institutional strength through measurable expansion risk displacing its vocation of faithful witness. Accordingly, Fitzmaurice critiques the implementation of consumerist and managerial paradigms within the church as being

¹²⁴ Barth, *CD IV/2*, IV.2, 616.

¹²⁵ John Fitzmaurice, *Virtue Ecclesiology: An Exploration in The Good Church* (Abingdon : New York: Ashgate Publishing, 2016), 157.

rooted in external goods that fail to reflect the church's true character and mission. Furthermore, he cautions that 'the church should not underestimate the implications of choosing methodologies and teleologies that do not reflect the essence of the gospel', contending that such decisions risk undermining its theological integrity and vocation.¹²⁶ Instead, he suggests that *good* growth in the church should be an ontological by-product of embodying inner goods such as holiness and wisdom rather than the causation of growth methodologies. Drawing on Erich Fromm's distinction between the acquisitive (having-mode) and ontological (being-mode) aspects of human existence, Fitzmaurice critiques churches that internalise this market logic, measuring success quantitatively rather than through holiness and wisdom. Renewal, he argues, requires a shift from acquisition to being, towards what he terms a 'virtue ecclesiology' that prioritises faithfulness over measurable outcomes. This, he argues, would ensure the church remains true to its calling as a witness to the Kingdom of God.

Fitzmaurice's critique of an acquisitive paradigm within the church raises important questions about how 'success' is defined and measured. If ecclesial identity is increasingly shaped by quantitative metrics, there is a risk that the church internalises an organising logic that prioritises efficiency over faithfulness. This tension becomes particularly evident when considering how growth methodologies implicitly shape the church's mission, asserting numerical expansion as an unqualified good. However, if growth is pursued as an end in itself (extensive) rather than as a natural outworking of spiritual formation (intensive), the church risks distorting its self-understanding and vocation. It is within this context that understanding the church as the body of Christ through the lens of disability offers a vital hermeneutic for assessing how notions of 'success' and 'health' are constructed and construed within contemporary ecclesiological discourse.

¹²⁶ Fitzmaurice, *Virtue Ecclesiology*, 200.

Questioning normative perfection and the discourse of growth

To this point, we have seen that notions of ‘success’ relating to growth within the Church of England arguably orient towards a broadly managerialist horizon, instrumentalising growth as a reification of success whilst simultaneously conflating organisational targets and divine providence. The body called ‘church’ is one that needs to become ‘fit’ and ‘healthy’ with the implicit normative expectations of all that this brings. Conversely, as a body that acts and deliberates together through the renewal of the Spirit, a Barthian perspective asserts the church can only experience authentic growth ‘extensively’ (numerically) when preceded by ‘intensive’ (spiritual) growth. Barth maintains that if numerical growth becomes the primary concern, ‘intensive’ growth risks losing its meaning and power.¹²⁷ Why, then, is so much resource being given by the CofE to these new, ‘extensive’ perspectives of the church? We have noted how the language used by the RR programme is functionally focused, tracing a utilitarian narrative of the church, repurposing terms such as ‘mission’ and ‘renewal’ as coterminous with the activity of evangelism and growth methodologies. In response, the guiding questions of this thesis have thus focused on the positivist claims made about the church, as the body of Christ, addressing what appears to be an uncritical adoption of a market-orientated logic underpinning much of the church growth theory and trend of managerialism currently embedded within the ecclesiological structures of the CofE.

For this reason, exploring the limits and contours of a body leads us to consider the ways in which disability can offer both an instructive and reparatory approach to current trends within the Church of England. By interrogating the epistemological claims of church growth and managerial methodologies, a new way of reading the church (as a body) begins to emerge. In seeking to develop this hermeneutic of disability as a lens for critiquing

¹²⁷ Barth, *CD IV/2*, IV.2, 648.

church growth methodologies, a new ecclesiological perspective of the body is thus formed and offers a delicate bridging between the poles of Fitzmaurice's 'virtue ecclesiology' and the pragmatism of church growth methodologies. By sustaining this gentle gaze upon communion, vulnerability, and relationality, a disability hermeneutic calls into question the normative assumptions and priorities underpinning strategies that prioritise measurable outcomes and efficiency over the intrinsic dignity of the body of Christ.

Furthermore, a disability hermeneutic holds the potential to challenge utilitarian instincts by reframing the inherent worth of the church as the outworking of the 'body broken', of Jesus giving up his body to the point of death. In this way, a disability hermeneutic questions what power made perfect in weakness might really mean for the church (2 Corinthians 12.9) and challenges strategies that prioritise visible power over the invisible work of God's grace. This perspective opens new perspectives for critiquing growth models that value contribution over existence and institutional gains over faithful witness.

However, this approach is not without its challenges. In the first instance, there is the cultural reality of how disability is perceived and the ensuing ontology it renders within modern sociological and anthropological definitions. One of the significant binaries facing disability studies is the dichotomy of the 'hero-victim' narrative. Given the social and physical obstacles posed by disabling conditions, the tendency is to either frame individuals within a story of overcoming through defiance against all odds (the hero) or to lament their struggle as abject and torturous, evoking pity and sorrow (the victim). Even when intentions are good, as a leading scholar in the intersection of theology, disability, and social justice, Nancy Eiesland, highlights that ableist theologies continually shape the grounded reality and implicit exclusionary nature of the contemporary church. Eiesland challenges traditional theological perspectives by presenting God as disabled, arguing that Jesus' post-resurrection wounds symbolise the divine embrace of disability and, in so doing, rejects the

precipitating discrimination that comes through the conflation of moral impurity and physical disability. She states:

The persistent thread within the Christian tradition has been that disability denotes an unusual relationship with God and that the person with disabilities is either divinely blessed or damned: the defiled evildoer or the spiritual superhero. As is often the case with such starkly contrasting characterisations, neither adequately represents the ordinary lives and lived realities of most people with disabilities.¹²⁸

This critique aligns with Brian Brock's observation that the church must, therefore, resist the temptation to reduce human beings as 'problems to be solved' or propagate the use of 'us' and 'them' categories within the discourse of disability. As Brock identifies: 'The language of disabilities is almost inextricably bound up with the distinctions between us and them—with the ones doing the talking assuming themselves to be the "us" and the people and the people being talked about the "them".'¹²⁹

Addressing this power imbalance is the task of a disability hermeneutic and will be developed in the following chapter, which invites the church to critique its reliance on growth methodologies and to reexamine its theological priorities based on a deeper epistemological reading of managerialism as a mode of organising logic that has become resident within much of the contemporary responses to decline within the Church of England. Whilst it is recognised that there can be an overextension of the metaphor, exploring the limits of a body, whether human or ecclesial, calls into question the metrics and apparatus used to encourage growth.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, we have seen that the Church of England's accommodation of market-driven growth strategies reveals the subtle yet far-reaching influence of neoliberal

¹²⁸ Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 70–71.

¹²⁹ Brock, *Wondrously Wounded*, 5.

logics upon ecclesial formation. While frequently framed in theological language and justified as the faithful enactment of the Great Commission, such growth strategies risk subordinating the church's vocation to market imperatives such as efficiency, measurability, and competitive expansion. The counter-vision articulated by the likes of Barth and Fitzmaurice reframes 'good growth' as the deepening of holiness, mutuality, and interdependence within the body of Christ, resisting the commodification of mission and the instrumentalisation of worship. This reframing challenges the assumption that flourishing is best evidenced through numerical gain, instead privileging qualitative dimensions of faithfulness, hospitality, and shared life. Crucially, it also exposes the theological and pastoral limitations of frameworks that privilege independence and output and thereby risk sidelining or devaluing those whose participation resists such measures.

As the next chapter will argue, a hermeneutic of disability provides a critical and constructive means of reconfiguring these paradigms—one that foregrounds care, relationality, and the inherent dignity of all members—and by doing so, gestures towards an ecclesial economy not of scarcity or competition, but of God's divine abundance.

CHAPTER 2.

The body of Christ: *Rethinking ecclesial embodiment*

2.1

On being a body: *Epistemology and the challenge of analogy*

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.

1 Corinthians 12.12

Introduction

In the previous chapter, we examined the emergence of growth as a governing concern within the contemporary Church of England, tracing how narratives of decline and renewal have increasingly been framed through managerial rationalities and market-oriented logics. Through a critical ecclesiological lens, we saw how the discourse surrounding programmes such as Renewal and Reform risks reconfiguring the church's self-understanding by aligning mission with measurable expansion and organisational optimisation. Under these conditions, centralised strategies advocating renewed efforts towards growth increasingly filter down to the parish level as implicit mandates, redefining *mission* as the causal link between evangelism and numerical expansion. Accordingly, growth is no longer simply one possible sign of ecclesial vitality but becomes the normative horizon through which faithfulness itself is assessed.

Such developments raise a deeper theological question concerning the conceptual frameworks through which the church understands itself. If ecclesial life is increasingly narrated through the language of strategy, productivity, and institutional viability, then the images and analogies used to describe the church inevitably carry an epistemological weight. Among the most enduring of these is the Pauline image of the church as the body of Christ. Yet this analogy is not entirely self-descriptive. The meaning of the body—whether it is

conceived as an organism, mechanism, communion, or system—depends upon the epistemic assumptions through which it is read. Accordingly, when it comes to narrating the ecclesial horizon of the CofE, words really do matter.

This chapter, therefore, turns from the critique of growth discourse to a more fundamental question: what kind of body is imagined when the church speaks of itself as the body of Christ? By examining the epistemological foundations that shape organisational paradigms and analogical reasoning, the discussion seeks to uncover how different accounts of embodiment inform contemporary ecclesial imagination. In doing so, it prepares the ground for a re-reading of Pauline body theology that resists mechanistic or managerial appropriations and instead attends more carefully to the theological significance of embodied difference and interdependence.

Questioning this adaptation of language leads us, then, to question the extent to which the architects of the RR programme can make particular claims on the nature of the church's mission—or at least to enquire what motivates the assumption that such a task is possible in the first place. From an organisational perspective, we have established that the RR programme seeks growth in numbers, paralleled only by the proclivity towards a younger demographic (framed as a desire towards 'growing younger').¹³⁰ Yet, the RR programme does not appear to clarify why the Church of England faces decline, nor does it manage to articulate the conditions or culture in which it recognises this decline.¹³¹ All the while, the prevalence of an instrumentalist view continues to characterise the trend of strategies that guide and control the church towards these newly reformed ecclesial ends and definition of mission. Subsequently, if the narrative of this activity is reframed as evangelism (whereby 'mission' equals 'evangelism'), then proclamation and conversion quickly become conflated

¹³⁰ General Synod, *Resourcing the Future: Implementation Plans*, Church of England (2016), 2.

¹³¹ Nye, "A Vision and Narrative for Renewal and Reform."

within the schema that attempts to arrest decline. However, if the locus of mission is recalibrated in this way, it exposes a dualism of motivations. On the one hand, we see the continuation of an earnest spiritual desire to share the Gospel and unmerited grace of God. Then, on the other, the organisational certainty of ‘sustainable’ growth capitulates to the demands of market forces, evoking strategies to build the church numerically. The question is, can any ecclesial body truly sustain this dualism? Defining the telos of this reformed evangelistic schema within the RR programme becomes essential to fostering honesty and transparency around the epistemic status of church growth as an emerging ideology.

To unearth this further and interrogate this burgeoning shift in language, we will now focus on the epistemic undercurrents of the new growth agenda that compound a functionalist view of the church. By taking this epistemological approach, this section traces the interplay between the epistemic foundation and the language of growth in the Church of England’s RR programme, attending particularly to the shift from theological discernment to managerial measurement. By drawing on the critiques of Charles Taylor, Martin Heidegger, and Brian Brock, we will expose the ways in which instrumental reason, atomism, and functionalist paradigms risk reshaping the ecclesial body into an apparatus of productivity rather than a sacramental community of divine hospitality. Such a diagnosis prepares the ground for subsequent theological reflection—particularly the development of a hermeneutic attentive to the vulnerabilities and interdependence of the ecclesial body, as will be explored further in the following section.

Epistemic foundation of growth agendas

Any rigorous engagement with contemporary church growth agendas must first address the epistemological currents that sustain them. Epistemology, concerned with the grounds of knowledge, justification, and truth, has itself been subject to sustained critique since the modern turn from Descartes through Kant and into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Each transition—from foundationalism’s *a priori* claims to the logical empiricism of the Vienna Circle, whose formalism shaped the social sciences with great confidence—also carried a repudiation of epistemology itself. These trajectories, often cloaked in claims to neutrality or scientific objectivity, have deeply informed the methodological assumptions of the social sciences and, consequently, the organisational logics embraced by sections of the contemporary church. Charles Taylor critiques this confidence as something he sees as having taken a reflexive turn towards distinguishing and mapping the formal operations of our thinking within the falsehood of a self-given certainty. This he exemplifies most distinctly through the assertion of the computer as a suitable model of the mind, or what he calls ‘the “overdetermination” of the epistemological construal’, that conflates a mechanistic account of human existence with our thoughts about what is actually real.¹³² As Taylor asserts:

The plausibility of the computer as a model of thinking comes partly from the fact that it is a machine, hence living “proof” that materialism can accommodate explanations in terms of intelligent performance; but partly too it comes from the widespread faith that our intelligent performances are ultimately to be understood in terms of formal operations.¹³³

This form of logical positivism is exacerbated by the ‘ideal of self-responsibility’ sustained by a notion of freedom and self-autonomy, favouring knowledge as construed by modern science. From this mechanistic account, Taylor surmises that human agency becomes the convergence of three connected notions: *disengagement*, *instrumental reason*, and *atomism*. It is interesting to note that these notions also appear to map equally well over a Hegelian aesthetic that categorises artistic representations of the human experience as being either ‘lyric’ (subjective and introspective interest), ‘epic’ (comprehensive and objective), or ‘dramatic’ (comprehending conflicts and resolutions). In this respect, Taylor’s first notion is one of neutrality, much like classical dualism, with the desire for a *disengaged*,

¹³² Charles Taylor, “Overcoming Epistemology,” in *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 6.

¹³³ Taylor, “Overcoming Epistemology,” 6.

objective (epic) perspective. Second is the need for *instrumental reason*, grounded in a view of the self that remains subject to change, negotiation, and reordering for expedient (dramatic) outcomes. Then, finally, the *atomisation* of society through a drive towards the interests of individualistic (lyric) purposes. If Taylor is right, the construal of knowledge critiqued through these trilateral anthropological beliefs of disengagement, instrumental reason, and atomism culminate in exposing the computer-model as the conflation of the scientific with the moral in a disengaged (dualistic) representation of reality. In much the same way, Brian Brock observes that Martin Heidegger's comprehensive critique of the epistemological tradition is not driven by the desire to construct a better epistemological theory but rather by moral concerns that also reject the Cartesian formulations of the dualistic self in favour of emphasising the importance of finitude, context, and communal speech.¹³⁴ This approach acknowledges that we are never alone but find ourselves interconnected through the unique interrelatedness of our Being-in-the-world, or what Heidegger calls 'Da-sein', the intelligibility of human existence based on our lived-experience rather than an abstract metaphysical or theoretical framework.¹³⁵ Brock commends this approach for its awareness that, 'any critique of modern society capable of fresh insight must go by way of criticism of the reductionist and atomizing modern epistemology that organizes and orients modern moral self-perception'.¹³⁶

This alternative moral epistemology rejects the theoretical idea of materiality in favour of a being-in-the-world that accounts for real interactions within the social and material world we inhabit. From this perspective, we can see the plausible links between logical positivism and the trend towards the use of organising terms such as 'vision' that seek to

¹³⁴ Brian Brock, *Ethics in a Technological Age* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2010), 33–39.

¹³⁵ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1996), 49–50.

¹³⁶ Brock, *Ethics in a Technological Age*, 36.

orientate and account for the resources and efforts of a church within a quasi ‘knowing’ of God’s will. In short, strategies that generate measurable targets and data become the means of empirically assessing the ‘success’ of mission. An example of this can be seen in the General Synod paper GS2038 entitled: *A vision and narrative for Renewal and Reform*. Within this schema, setting the mission narrative becomes key to reliably following (or responding to) what should otherwise be a prayerful discernment of what ‘God is doing’ within the church. The paper states:

One of the clear and intended outcomes of this work is to reverse the decline of the Church of England so that we become a growing church, in every region and for every generation; a church open to and for everyone in England, building up the Body of Christ and working for the common good; a confident church, equipping new generations of leaders, ordained and lay, for ministry and mission; a serving church where all God’s people live out their vocation to serve and to witness.¹³⁷

The intentionality of encouraging a renewed effort to ‘reverse the decline’ of the church by seeking growth is something to be commended and welcomed. However, what the RR programme fails to identify is what makes this growth an intelligible objective within the current trends of the Church of England beyond the (*dramatic*) crisis narrative of numerical decline.¹³⁸ However, what is observable from this discourse is how sociological and organisational analysis can be readily mapped over the ecclesial landscape envisioned by the architects of the RR programme.

From epistemology to organisational paradigm

The foundational work of Gibson Burrell and Gareth Morgan is instructive in this regard. Their influential book, *Sociological Paradigms and Organisational Analysis: Elements of the Sociology of Corporate Life* (1979), provides a formative framework for understanding organisational theory by identifying the epistemological paradigms that structure its

¹³⁷ Nye, “A Vision and Narrative for Renewal and Reform.” §10.

¹³⁸ Keith Anthony Elford, “Being and Becoming the Church: Organisational and Ecclesiological Perspectives on Renewal and Reform in the Church of England” (PhD University of Roehampton, 2022), 7.

methods and assumptions. As outlined earlier in Chapter 1.2, managerialism emerged as a governing logic in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Burrell and Morgan's contribution lies in systematising the paradigmatic foundations through which such organisational rationalities are theorised and analysed. Central to their scheme is the recognition that logical positivism functions as an epistemological foundation within several of the models of analysis they identify. As they state:

We use 'positivist' here to characterise epistemologies which seek to explain and predict what happens in the social world by searching for regularities and causal relationships between its constituent elements. Positivist epistemology is in essence based upon the traditional approaches which dominate the natural sciences.¹³⁹

Key to their scheme is a matrix of four mutually exclusive 'paradigms' of social theory: 'radical humanist', 'radical structuralist', 'interpretive' and 'functionalist'. Each is mapped across the axes of 'subjective-objective' and 'regulation-radical change', as illustrated by Berrell and Morgan in the following (Figure 1):

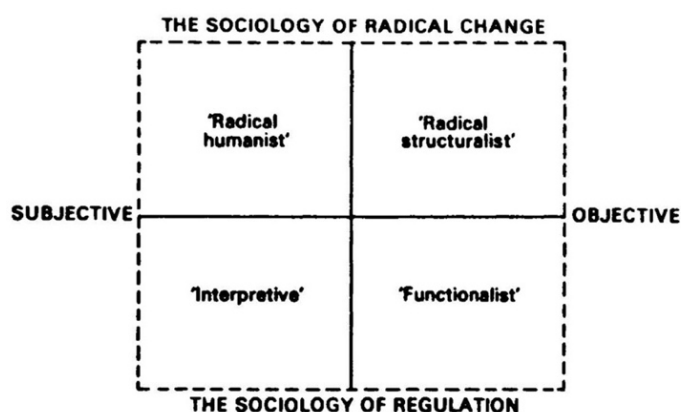


Figure 1. Berrell and Morgan's *Four Paradigms* model for the analysis of social theory.¹⁴⁰

This quadratic arrangement offers a generous and nuanced categorisation of the organising formula that overcomes what Burrell and Morgan identify as the sociological proclivities and polarisations that tend to dominate the field of organisational theory.

¹³⁹ Gibson Burrell and Gareth Morgan, *Sociological Paradigms and Organisational Analysis: Elements of the Sociology of Corporate Life*, Second edition ed. (London: Routledge, 2017), 5.

¹⁴⁰ Burrell and Morgan, *Sociological Paradigms and Organisational Analysis*, 22, Fig. 3.1.

However, mapping the paradigms across this grid subsumes the entire epistemological tradition within the social sciences, framing them polemically as being either ‘positivist’ or ‘anti-positivist’. Essentially, by asserting a logical-positivist epistemology, characteristic of the Vienna Circle, all other perspectives become subordinate, cast within the ‘subjective’ spectrum of the axis to preclude any deviation from this new managerial paradigm. As a result, Burrell and Morgan acknowledge the dominance of the functionalist paradigm that lies at the heart of the majority of contemporary social and organisational theories. They observe:

The functionalist approach to social science tends to assume that the social world is composed of relatively concrete empirical artefacts and relationships which can be identified, studied and measured through approaches derived from the natural sciences. The use of mechanical and biological analogies as a means of modelling and understanding the social world is particularly favoured in many functionalist theories.¹⁴¹

While functionalist theories have the benefit of being able to identify, regulate, measure, and maximise efficiency, the dependency placed on narrative, specifically analogy, to embed their use is worth noting. The same power of analogy is not lost on Saint Paul in his appeal to the Corinthian church, and based on this reliance, is it any wonder that when similar biological analogies are employed within scripture, these same organisational theories are employed to articulate Paul’s use of the body? It does not require a great leap to see that if functionalist narratives frequently employ an organic analogy, then Paul’s use of the body in the context of the church would appear as a corollary to organisational narratives grounded in the functionalist (growth) paradigm, particularly as the use of biological analogy was equally familiar to those in the Corinthian church of the first century.

¹⁴¹ Burrell and Morgan, *Sociological Paradigms and Organisational Analysis*, 26.

The body between mechanism and communion

In his first epistle to the church in Corinth, Saint Paul paints a picture of the new and peculiar phenomenon of the Christian community as being analogous to that of a body (1 Cor. 12). The image has been well used throughout much of the Christian tradition and on many occasions co-opted to valorise a language of ‘inclusion’, evoking the notion of vocational roles, positions, and belonging that govern the operational and organisational life of the church. Yet, whilst the application of this analogy within the contemporary church tends to avoid Luther’s predestined conflation between occupational endeavour and God’s purpose for individuals, or ‘calling’ (*Beruf*), the use of ‘body’ language (*soma*) and specifically within this passage from Corinthians carries the potency and priority of the body as both divine organisation and the bread of the Eucharistic feast. Through this schema, members are united as organs and fluid within a predefined and non-negotiable configuration. However, as Brock observes, these forms of interpretation are frequently limited in scope or exegetical depth, giving rise to an ecclesial hermeneutic that presupposes everyone as either being equal or assumes that—in much the same ways as pieces of a puzzle—different contributions by members of the church are implicitly connected to the whole.¹⁴² A clear example of this can be seen in the Church of England’s vision and strategy paper ‘Simpler, Humbler, Bolder’ presented by the Archbishop of York, Stephen Cottrell, to the General Synod in July 2021. The paper sets out a reframing of the missional imperative of the CofE as ‘a Jesus Christ centred and Jesus Christ shaped church’, by connecting the Corinthian passage (specifically 1 Cor 12.12-15) to emphasise the need for all to participate, by exegeting the text and stipulating: ‘The church is the body of Christ. Together, we are the limbs and members. We all have a part to play’.¹⁴³

¹⁴² Brock, *Wondrously Wounded*, 202–03.

¹⁴³ Cottrell, *Simpler, Humbler, Bolder*, para. 10.

In contrast, Brock asserts the focus of the Corinthian passage orientates towards the language of the body as being a political entity seeking ‘the renewal, healing, and opening of genuine communion with God and others’.¹⁴⁴ Essentially, as the body of Christ, the church must reflect a distinctive relational dynamic that receives every member as being ‘an active giver or conduit of divine love’.¹⁴⁵ Consequently, the interpersonal relations that emerge between members bring about what he calls a ‘peculiar togetherness’ capable of fostering social mutuality by fundamentally altering self-definitions, language, and a polity capable of resisting the secularised agenda of inclusion.¹⁴⁶ It is important to note however that by rejecting the term ‘inclusion’, Brock does not mean to dismiss the essential idea of radical welcome, or the belonging open to all within the vast breadth of the church’s communion. Rather, he is rejecting the technocratic and patronising use of the term that assumes the prior strength of a centralised ‘we’ against a needy and peripheral ‘them’ as if those who did the excluding in the first place might magnanimously opt to redefine the boundaries governing inclusion. Instead, Brock and Wannenwetsch highlight that Paul’s introduction of an analogous body is intended to contradict the Corinthian presumptions of the body (and its margins) rather than begin a process of reasoning with their natural knowledge to construct a ‘theologico-political account of the church.’¹⁴⁷ Further to this, they exegete the prevailing Corinthian conception of an ecclesial-social arrangement organised around a hierarchy of wisdom that reflects much of the modern ‘managerialist account of political organization’.¹⁴⁸ They are keen to point out that Paul is therefore not seeking to develop a doctrine of ‘the body of Christ’, but rather, for the church to consider itself a body that *belongs* to Christ. It is also worth noting the limitations of this since any

¹⁴⁴ Brock, *Wondrously Wounded*, 202.

¹⁴⁵ Brock, *Wondrously Wounded*, 202.

¹⁴⁶ Brock, *Wondrously Wounded*, 201.

¹⁴⁷ Brian Brock and Bernd Wannenwetsch, *The Therapy of the Christian Body: A Theological Exposition of Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians*, vol. Vol. 2 (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2018), 85.

¹⁴⁸ Brock and Wannenwetsch, *The Therapy of the Christian Body*, Vol. 2, 86.

analogy, by definition, contains differences as well as similarities. Accordingly, not everything considered true of a physical body will be true of a social one. Or, to put it another way, the linguistic relationship between an organic body and a social-ecclesial body is analogous, not identical. As such, Brock and Wannenwetsch conclude by cautioning:

Only a sharp limitation of our reliance on the body image as one of Paul's ways of describing the proper form of the Christian community will avoid deploying it in ways that effectively uphold or establish politically manipulative accounts of the church.¹⁴⁹

We can see from this appeal that any functionalist use of the analogous body—as a means to import an organising logic—begins to break down Paul's intention to describe the ecclesial body as a political entity *sui generis*. This also makes sense of the implicit nature of the instrumentalisation and the managerialist account of ecclesiology levelled at the RR programme by the likes of John Milbank, Martyn Percy, and Lyndon Shakespeare. As Shakespeare most clearly sets out through his use of Thomistic logic, which seeks to resist any account of the church as a mechanism. As he states:

[churches] that adopt the logic of managerialism reflect a conceptual problem in attending to the interconnection of human bodily life, human purposefulness, and the promise of divine happiness and joy. Whereas a vision like that of Aquinas promotes a fully human account of life with God, all that a managerial-inspired ecclesiology can sustain is a dim picture of a machine-like body that requires the manipulation by techniques for it to appear to be alive. Managerial-orientated ecclesiologies are ultimately ill equipped to address how the body of Christ is the foundation of the ecclesial body and the one in whom Christians are incorporated through the instrumentality of his humanity by means of the sacraments.¹⁵⁰

In short, if anything should have an instrumental effect on the church, it must be sacramental rather than systems-based. Therefore, the interconnectedness between being a human body and being the body of Christ is necessary to resist the potentially operant perspectives of managerialism that risk fragmenting and dismembering the church for operational gains. The alternative fecundity that Shakespeare encourages thus contrasts the productive intent of any managerial logic.

¹⁴⁹ Brock and Wannenwetsch, *The Therapy of the Christian Body*, Vol. 2, 86.

¹⁵⁰ Shakespeare, *Being the Body of Christ*, 180.

The body between cultivation and extraction

Similarly, as we have seen in the previous chapter, the impetus that animates the RR programme towards an imagination for missional activity is framed within the corollary of an agricultural bounty identified by Jesus in the Gospel of Luke (10.2): ‘The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field’. While this scriptural narrative reveals the fecundity (or gift) of God’s grace as a cooperative endeavour, tracing the language of growth within RR texts and discourse reveals a rather different perspective of this same passage. Within the RR discourse, the logic of growth is driven by terms such as ‘impact’, ‘streamline’, and ‘deployment’, which serve to galvanise this new orientation towards exacting (and measurable) efficiency.¹⁵¹ This transposition of language from *fecundity* to *productivity* reveals the functional ethos that Heidegger names a ‘standing-reserve’, where natural resources become instrumentalised towards the means and ends of preconfigured production. As such, the harvest is only ever good if it is good for something. Within this schema, everything is seen as a potential energy source, something that needs to be contained, organised, and optimised. In this way, human capabilities become the means towards technological ends, and workers become instruments within this system of production—a resource to be arranged, rearranged, or disposed of as desired. Similarly, the technological conscription of the ground to yield crops frames the land as nothing more than a reserve, as a raw material for technical operations that enables the potential of grain to be stored and utilised when needed (expedited). Heidegger brings our attention to this through the example of coal mining, a process that necessitates natural resources to become a form of ‘reserve’. He observes:

¹⁵¹ Justin Welby and John Sentamu, “Each Generation: A Programme for Reform and Renewal” (General Synod, General Synod of the Church of England, 2015).

The coal that has been hauled out in some mining district has not been supplied in order that it may simply be present somewhere or other. It is stockpiled; that is, it is on call, ready to deliver the sun's warmth that is stored in it. The sun's warmth is challenged forth for heat, which in turn is ordered to deliver steam whose pressure turns the wheels that keep a factory running.¹⁵²

At the heart of this is Heidegger's attention to the way in which technology 'challenges forth' rather than takes care of the natural world. He contrasts this demand upon nature with the way of the 'peasant' who is, instead, given to cultivating, waiting, and setting the field in good order, rather than instrumentalising nature towards 'the unreasonable demand that it supply energy that can be extracted and stored'. Converse to the extraction of coal, the activities of the peasant farmer do not 'challenge the soil of the field'; instead, they protect the crops, leaving them 'in the keeping of the forces of growth', which Heidegger frames as a polemic to the 'grip' of technology that has transformed agriculture into a 'mechanized food industry'.¹⁵³ Under these conditions, everything encountered as modern technology can be exploited for some technical use. It is worth noting that Heidegger's questioning of technology does not extend to all forms of its historical development but rather towards the modern conception of what technology *is*. His concern is to expose the 'instrumental and anthropological definition of technology' and our inevitable interdependence in order to separate this definition from what he calls the 'essence' of technology that can only be known once our relation to it becomes free and unchained.¹⁵⁴ Heidegger acknowledges that our relationship to the *essence* of technology is, therefore, vastly different to our instrumentalised connection and *use* of technology, yet the modern pervasiveness of technology obviates our understanding of what it is really doing *to* us, or, in Heidegger's terms what it is 'revealing'. In setting out this distinction, Heidegger gives the example of people using an old wooden bridge to cross the river Rhine. It may at first

¹⁵² Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology: and Other Essays*, 1st ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 15.

¹⁵³ Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*, 14–15.

¹⁵⁴ Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*, 3–4.

appear as if the bridge ‘challenges forth’ the river, demanding a linkage between banks to function as a continual chain of access, but Heidegger argues that the bridge allows the river to continue uninterrupted within its own flow and form. By contrast, the hydroelectric plant ‘sets-upon’ the river in such a way that its very structure transforms the essence of the river to that of becoming a ‘water power supplier’ within an energy-producing sequence of cables and control.¹⁵⁵

In much the same way, the RR programme’s discursive shift from the gratuitous imagery of God’s harvest to the technocratic lexicon of ‘impact’, ‘deployment’, and ‘streamlining’ can be read as a kind of ecclesial ‘setting-upon’. The biblical metaphor of the harvest, when reframed through the operational priorities of measurable outcomes and strategic allocation, no longer simply invites participation in the rhythms of divine fecundity but reconfigures the church’s life into a system of resource extraction and optimisation. Here, the congregation, clergy, and even the gospel itself risk being apprehended primarily as inputs into a growth mechanism, subject to the same evaluative and productive logics that Heidegger warns transform the river into a power source. The result is that mission becomes less about tending to the field in trust of God’s fecundity and more about engineering the field to produce the desired returns on demand.

Observing this same distinction between fecundity (as cultivating) and production (as instrumentalised), Wendell Berry frames the division between the notions of *nurture* versus *exploitation*. He asserts that, to a greater or lesser extent, each of us is the product of a society characterised by the persistent division of exploitation and nurture operating between people and within them. Berry offers us a similar agricultural account that accords with the development of Heidegger’s moral epistemological framework:

I conceive a strip-miner to be a model exploiter, and as a model nurturer I take the old-fashioned idea or ideal of a farmer. The exploiter is a specialist, an expert; the nurturer is not. The standard of the exploiter is efficiency; the standard of the nurturer is care. The exploiter’s goal is money,

¹⁵⁵ Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*, 16.

profit; the nurturer's goal is health — his land's health, his own, his family's, his community's, his country's. Whereas the exploiter asks of a piece of land only how much and how quickly it can be made to produce, the nurturer asks a question that is much more complex and difficult: What is its carrying capacity? (That is: How much can be taken from it without diminishing it? What can it produce dependably for an indefinite time?) The exploiter wishes to earn as much as possible by as little work as possible; the nurturer expects, certainly, to have a decent living from his work, but his characteristic wish is to work as well as possible. The competence of the exploiter is in organization; that of the nurturer is in order — a human order, that is, that accommodates itself both to other order and to mystery. The exploiter typically serves an institution or organization; the nurturer serves land, household, community, and place. The exploiter thinks in terms of numbers, quantities, "hard facts"; the nurturer in terms of character, condition, quality, kind.¹⁵⁶

While distinctly more polemic in characterisation, Berry's conception of technology is much the same as Heidegger's in naming the organising and rearranging of energy as a form of commodification. Whether framed within Berry's 'care' versus 'efficiency' or Heidegger's 'cultivation' versus 'instrumentalisation', neither concern themselves with any individual technologies *per se* but, instead, with the ontological *essence* of technology and the ensuing dualistic epistemological framework that mechanises our being-in-the-world. This brings us back to what Taylor calls *instrumental reason*, the 'punctual view' of the self that propagates the computer model of the mind with the modern aspiration of autonomy. As Taylor asserts, the 'punctual view of the self, ideally ready as free and rational to treat these worlds—and even some of the features of his own character—instrumentally, as subject to change and reorganizing in order the better to secure the welfare of himself and others.'¹⁵⁷ From this, we can see that the impulse to secure welfare and address the narrative of decline as key features of the RR programme agenda reflects Taylor's framing of an 'instrumentalised reason' guiding the institutional response to the existential and empirical analysis of numerical decline.

The question this raises from an ecclesiological perspective is to what extent this reasoning alters the embodiment of the church becoming instrumentalised through growth

¹⁵⁶ Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture*, 3rd ed. (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1997), 6–7.

¹⁵⁷ Taylor, "Overcoming Epistemology," 7.

initiatives. One of the key issues is who gets to decide what the welfare and character of the church should be. As the body of Christ, who decides what a preferable body looks like? A contention of this thesis is that this process of normativity is implicitly bound within the logical positivism of organising theories that inherently lack any theological reflection. This can be seen most clearly in the central document governing the original impetus for the RR programme that outlines a sequence of ‘challenges’ that are subsequently met by a series of ‘opportunities’ for growth. A final claim concludes this sequence: ‘*Renewal and Reform* will seek to enable and facilitate confident and hopeful engagement with these and other challenges, nurturing the good and re-imagining the unsustainable’.¹⁵⁸

While these statements are intended to create clarity, they raise more questions than answers. Namely, when it comes to the life of the church, how do we agree on precisely what is deemed to be sustainable or unsustainable? This is much the same dilemma we saw earlier in what Brock highlights as the double-bind effect inherent within the language of inclusion. By framing the ecclesial body as ‘unsustainable’, this assumes a corollary (blueprint) must also exist for what is considered ‘sustainable’. Thus, any use of the phrase ‘re-imagining the unsustainable’ functions within the certainty of an organising logic and economy of resources that evokes Heidegger’s notion of ‘challenging forth’ (or what Berry calls exploitation). There is a problem, and we know how to ‘fix’ it. Commenting on the relocation of function within Heidegger’s conception of technology, Hubert Dreyfus notes that, in general, we tend to deal with things as resources to be used and disposed of when no longer needed. To illustrate this, he gives the example of a Japanese tea ceremony, juxtaposing the use of a Styrofoam cup over that of a ceramic one. From a functionalist perspective, the Styrofoam cup is significantly better at insulating liquid and can be easily disposed of when no longer required. However, as Dreyfus points out, this efficiency

¹⁵⁸ Nye, “A Vision and Narrative for Renewal and Reform.” §9.

overlooks the delicate beauty of the hand-painted ceramic cup poised at the centre of the drinking ceremony, an object to be cherished and handed from one generation to the next. An object capable of performing more than a mere utility but instead one that contains the profound social meaning of familial identity. As Dreyfus surmises, our societal norms, therefore, reflect our implicit epistemological convictions:

[...] the practices containing an understanding of what it is to be a human being, those containing an interpretation of what it is to be a thing, and those defining society fit together. Social practices thus transmit not only an implicit understanding of what it is to be a human being, an animal, or an object, but, finally, an understanding of what it is for anything to be at all.¹⁵⁹

The vulnerability of the church, deemed ‘unsuccessful’, therefore requires a deeper qualifier to explicitly name what is implicitly considered a ‘successful’ church. As in the case of the Styrofoam cup, if the utility of heat and the need for expedience are key qualifiers, then evidently, the ceramic teacup becomes an unnecessary surplus to requirement (or unsustainable). Yet if there is a ceremony at play, one that transmits meaning and belonging beyond the imminence of function, then the vulnerable and delicate church may hold far deeper meaning than the RR programme can convey through its articulation of the body through the sacrament of the Eucharist.

Recognising these same inherent tensions and constraints operating between the organic and organisational analogies of a body, Mary Douglas argues that our perception and understanding of the human body are closely linked to how an organisation or institution are subsequently perceived or understood. She states:

The social body constrains the way the physical body is perceived. The physical experience of the body, always modified by the social categories through which it is known, sustains a particular view of society. There is a continual exchange of meanings between the two kinds of bodily experience so that each reinforces the categories of the other.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁹ Hubert L. Dreyfus, “Heidegger on the Connection Between Nihilism, Art, Technology, and Politics,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger*, ed. Charles B. Guignon (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 351.

¹⁶⁰ Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1996), 69.

Whilst the desire for numerical growth is not something to reject outright, we have seen that exploring the language of growth replete within the RR programme through an epistemological lens offers a clearer understanding of where the ontological tensions lie.

Summary

Growth in the church should be welcomed and viewed as desirable, but as we have seen, the continued conflation of managerialism within this desire belies the care and nurture that truly sustains the interrelatedness of the ecclesial body. Ultimately, the epistemic structures underpinning contemporary church growth strategies reveal far more than a set of neutral techniques for reversing decline; they disclose a deep alignment with the instrumental rationality and functionalist paradigms characteristic of late modernity. The RR programme's turn towards measurable targets, efficiency, and strategic deployment exemplifies the way in which ecclesial life can become subsumed within a managerial imagination that treats the body of Christ as a resource to be optimised rather than a mystery to be received. By juxtaposing Heidegger's distinction between cultivation and instrumentalisation, Berry's contrast of nurture and exploitation, and Brock's critique of technocratic inclusion, we see that the choice before the church is not merely between growth and decline, but between competing visions of what it means to be the church at all.

If the church is to resist the reduction of its sacramental and communal life to the status of a 'standing-reserve', it must recover forms of knowing and organising rooted in care, receptivity, and theological discernment. This entails an epistemological reorientation—away from mechanistic accounts of ecclesial flourishing and towards an embodied, relational, and Christ-centred understanding of growth—one that will be further illuminated in the next chapter through the lens of a hermeneutic of disability and expose the difference between describing our participation *in* a body and acting *as* a body.

‘The things that are not’: *An alternative view of the body*

God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him.

1 Corinthians 1.28–29

Introduction

When human bodies are framed within the language of technology, they soon become foreign objects. When this happens, we begin to speak *of* our body and *about* our body as if we are not actually a body ourselves. In short, we do not just have a body; we *are* a body. By interrogating the epistemological underpinnings of how the church perceives itself and others, it is instructive to begin with a theological anthropology that resists the mechanising logic of modernity. From this vantage point, theological discourse is pressed to engage with those whose humanity is persistently contested, especially people with profound intellectual disabilities, whose lives confront prevailing assumptions about agency, productivity, and value.

Drawing on the work of Hans Reinders, Martin Buber, James Nelson, and Rowan Williams, this section explores how the witness of lives deemed ‘unviable’ disrupts utilitarian measures of worth and invites a reimagining of ecclesial identity beyond the managerial calculus of sustainability. The question is not simply what the church *does* for those considered ‘weaker’ or ‘less productive,’ but how the church understands *itself* in relation to the other. As we explored at the start of this chapter, through Heidegger’s ontology, Brock identifies that there is no substance to the subject-object or *otherness* sufficient to construct a coherent ontology for the church. Following this assertion, we will build on Martin

Buber's assertion of the primacy of I-Thou relations to reveal the inherent limitations of instrumentalisation both as a method of organising (categorising) the world but also the essential identity of the church that can only fully be expressed in ontological rather than functional terms.

Finding the intelligible body

Much like Taylor's rejection of the 'computer mind' model of human existence, we begin with Stanley Hauerwas, who asserts this same epistemological break. He rejects the Cartesian mind-body dualism in favour of a more holistic approach to human existence conveyed by a language that ultimately locates our bodies in relation to that of Christ's own body. Hauerwas writes:

Our grammar often betrays us. We say we have a body. That seems to suggest I am something distinguishable from my body. In good capitalist fashion, the body becomes another possession I can use as I see fit. But Paul does not think there is an "I" that *has* a body. We are our bodies. And the body we are together is one that has been bought with a price. Our bodies are, therefore, not our own to do with as we please. Rather our bodies are a resting place for the Holy Spirit. Paul even seems to think that what our bodies do and do not do makes a difference for our ability to be a holy people.¹⁶¹

But what are the limits of this existence as a human body? In the opening passage above, Saint Paul makes his appeal to the cruciform lives of those considered 'despised' or as 'the things that are not', whose very existence is contested, having failed to conform to the currency of the world (1 Cor 1.28-29).

Reflecting on the reception of those whose existence echoes much of this cruciform dynamic, the anthropologist Pamela Cushing narrates the imaginative expansion experienced by caregivers in a L'Arche community, where those with and without intellectual disability live and work with one another. She observes that this kind of being together confronts our social imaginary—the implicit understandings, background

¹⁶¹ Stanley Hauerwas, *Working with Words: On Learning to Speak Christian* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011), 151.

assumptions, and collective expectations shaping how individuals perceive their relationships, roles, and possibilities within a community—and is, for many, hard to accept. As Cushing contends: “The ongoing debates in moral philosophy and theology over whether and how concepts of personhood, suffering, justice and spiritual capacity apply to people with developmental disabilities demonstrate that, for some, the status of their humanness remains contested.”¹⁶² Within disability studies, the reality of contested humanity is well documented, particularly with respect to the demarcation of anthropological boundaries and definitions.¹⁶³ In response to the potentially dehumanising nature of such accounts, it is worth noting that much of the field is distinctly ethnographic, grounded in real-life stories and vignettes that serve to highlight the brutal realities of the social constructs underpinning the discrimination of people with disability.

Hans Reinders illustrates this approach through the story of Kelly, a young girl he met in a residential care home for people with intellectual disabilities. Diagnosed with microcephaly—a condition in which a significant portion of the brain is missing—Kelly was admitted to the home as a baby. At first, some staff questioned whether she could be considered fully human. Yet, through the attention of those giving care and Kelly’s response in receiving that care, her humanity began to be fully known. Reinders recalls this revelatory moment in an interview with the care home’s director:

When Kelly was still a baby, the only thing she seemed capable of doing was to take a deep breath now and then. In her case we did not think of this as something she did, say, as something like “sighing,” as if she were lamenting her condition. Instead, we assumed her taking a deep breath was only a respiratory reflex. Until somebody noticed it seemed to depend on who spoke to her. When spoken to by particular voices the changing respiration pattern stopped. Once the voice

¹⁶² Pamela Cushing, “Disability Attitudes, Cultural Conditions, and the Moral Imagination,” in *The Paradox of Disability: Responses to Jean Vanier and L’Arche Communities from Theology and the Sciences*, ed. Hans S. Reinders (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2010), 78.

¹⁶³ Brian Brock, “Introduction: Disability and the Quest for the Human,” in *Disability in the Christian Tradition: A Reader*, ed. John Swinton Brian Brock (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2012), 1–5.

stopped, she started again. Thank Heavens! At least she could do something, if it was only “sighing.” Our Kelly turned out to be human.¹⁶⁴

Reflecting on the value of human life, Reinders affirms the view of Pope John Paul II, who asserts that ‘the disabled person is one of us, a sharer in the same humanity’, and claims this for Kelly as certainly being ‘one of us’.¹⁶⁵ The ontological challenge here is the dualistic account associating human agency as the telos of viable humanity. Perception of this subject-object relation is key. From this position, Reinders develops a reparatory account of life that ‘makes approaching Kelly as a human being an intelligible act’ which serves to ‘sustain the effort to include profoundly disabled human beings in our lives, not question whether they should live at all’.¹⁶⁶ As Reinders points out, the real challenge in contemporary society is that a ‘human being does not count as truly “human” unless it can do something’.¹⁶⁷

Situated within the technocratic logic of the RR programme, the insistence on contribution and performance raises a critical ecclesiological question: does the imperative to ‘do something’ align with the conditions that render a church viable, or ‘sustainable’, as an ecclesial body? While this question will be developed more fully in the subsequent chapter, it is already clear that the designation of a church as ‘unsustainable’ implies a deficit that exceeds the quantifiable absence of numerical growth. In much the same way that the fragile vulnerability embodied in the life of Kelly exposes the limits of human knowing, so too the application of terms such as ‘unsustainability’ within the church exposes a theological deficit of greater magnitude than institutional decline. What is at stake is not merely organisational longevity, but the very substance Hauerwas locates in the church as a resting place for the Holy Spirit. Thus, to invoke the notion of an ecclesial body as being

¹⁶⁴ Hans S. Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship: Profound Disability, Theological Anthropology, and Ethics* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008), 20.

¹⁶⁵ Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship*, 19.

¹⁶⁶ Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship*, 31.

¹⁶⁷ Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship*, 21.

‘unsustainable’ is to signal a profound displacement, whereby the church’s breath ceases to be read as a pneumatological ‘sigh’ and becomes instead the last gasp of an exhausted body.

Reinders highlights the way language is used by Kelly’s care home community, who narrate her posture through such emotions as “looking cheerful”, “being sad”, or “being happy” in order to rehearse her being fully human. Yet, he notes, this same metaphorical use of language aimed towards describing Kelly’s state of mind is also discordant, substituting the implicit claim on her life *as if* she is a human being rather than *being* human and *as if* she were expressing emotions that, in reality, she lacks the mental state to experience. Reinders questions whether this metaphorical use of language plays out in the form of unintentional self-deception, whereby the comments from staff fail to reflect what they really think (or have witnessed) but are simply the by-product of self-deception, an attempt to ‘make sense’ of Kelly’s condition when sense-making seems unattainable.

Reinders then draws our attention to a further vignette of a nurse playing with a young disabled man. As he passes this scene, the same director turns to him and comments: ‘Of course, that young man has no clue to what’s going on’. From an institutional perspective, this begs the question: What is the point of playing a game with someone who has no idea what is happening? Particularly when there is no possibility of ‘growing into’ anything, given that the young man’s cognitive and physical abilities remain chronically hindered (lacking any capacity for purposive action). This negative projection is something Abraham Heschel contends cannot be derived from a pure or neutral position but is, instead, only ever derived from an *a priori* assumption of human nature, asserting that ‘any attempt to derive an image from human nature can only result in extracting the image originally injected in it’.¹⁶⁸ In effect, the disingenuous treatment of another is only ever the assertion of a false social imaginary.

¹⁶⁸ Abraham J. Heschel, *Who is man?*, Raymond Fred West memorial lectures at Stanford University, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1965), 8.

Reinders concludes that the reality of a person lacking ‘purposive agency’ (considered normative to living a human life) quickly cascades into an uncomfortable question, one that cannot be avoided. He asks: ‘What is the point of treating someone as a human being when one’s belief about what it means to be human implies that she is not, in fact, a human being?’.¹⁶⁹ This comment belies the implicit strain in our moral culture that frequently negates the cruciform life as that of being fully human. Much like Taylor, Reinders is critical of the modern turn towards an agency of selfhood as the locus of our humanity.

Differentiating ecclesial bodies

Without the risk of overextending the analogous body offered by Saint Paul to the Corinthian church, we can use this same enquiry to ask a similar question about the discourse inherent within the language of the RR programme. Essentially, how might the pragmatism of church growth and managerial strategy create a differentiation between those churches categorised as being ‘successful’ and those ‘struggling’ to get by? Or, to put it more directly, what is the point of treating a church as being alive when one’s belief about the metrics of sustainability implies the eucharistic community in question is, in fact, no longer ‘viable’?

As we have seen thus far, from a theological perspective, the RR programme does not explicitly identify what an ‘unsustainable’ church might be insofar as making congregational metrics an intelligible guide for discernment (i.e. how small is too small?). Reinders refers to this sort of framework as the ‘paradigm of the successful achiever’ that he contends is a restriction upon the weakest in society—those who typically lack social appeal—and thus

¹⁶⁹ Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship*, 24.

stagnates their position within the hegemony of cultural hierarchy.¹⁷⁰ In response, he argues that people with intellectual disability need friends far more than they need so-called ‘success’. Central to this claim is that any framework that prioritises selfhood and positive agency (production) as the defining characteristics of being human is simply unintelligible.

In much the same way, the biblical *Parable of the Sower* is instructive in guiding our attention away from the language of ‘success’ (Matt 13.1-9) and towards God’s grace. The growth of the seed comes not from the efforts of the one who sows but through the created capacity for growth convalescing within the seed and soil as gifted by God. As Martyn Percy observes most succinctly, the ‘question the parable throws back to the church is this: what kind of growth can you expect from the ground and conditions you work with?’¹⁷¹ Growth is not in the hands of the labourer in the same way that it is not in the gift of the church. It is not, therefore, ‘unsustainable’ for the church to exist on hard ground, but the conditions in which the seed is received that need to be critiqued. Under these terms, it is the metaphorical soil that matters.

As a mode of reception, a theology of disability, therefore, opens the possibility to profoundly engage with the concept of unconditional acceptance. Yet, as Reinders suggests, there remains an uneasy contradiction with our ‘innermost core’ as defined by our ‘reflective self’ due to the vulnerability of those with profound disability.¹⁷² This tension evokes Martin Buber’s use of *I–Thou*, whereby human identity is made known through the alterity of the other. Buber distinguishes this sense of *knowing* from categories such as ‘He’ or ‘She’, which he regards as an atomising language that reduces human beings to no more than ‘a loose

¹⁷⁰ Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship*, 27.

¹⁷¹ Martyn Percy, “Growth and Management in the Church of England: Some Comments,” in *Reasonable Radical? Reading the Writings of Martyn Percy*, ed. Ian S. Markham and Joshua Daniel (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2018), 238.

¹⁷² Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship*, 225.

bundle of named qualities'.¹⁷³ Under these conditions, people become a non-relational 'It', an object to be experienced rather than a person to be known. This reductive Kantian subject-object position frames the human subject as the central axis around which all other objects exist, a position that, for Buber, is ontologically fallacious. He regards this conception of a human being as untenable. Instead, he draws our attention to the necessary relation between people as the means by which we are able to speak the primary word *I-Thou* as an account of being fully human. As Buber contends:

Just as the melody is not made up of notes nor the verse of words nor the statue of lines, but they must be tugged and dragged till their unity has been scattered into these many pieces, so with the man to whom I say Thou. I can take out from him the colour of his hair, or of his speech, or of his goodness. I must continually do this. But each time I do it he ceases to be Thou.¹⁷⁴

From this, we can see that, according to Buber, the new public management (NPM) discourse operative within the RR programme scatters the ecclesial body, dividing it into a sequence of 'named qualities' (or growth imperatives) that can be quantified and controlled. Ecclesiologically, this approach obviates receiving the body called 'church' holistically through a mode of participation (worship) only found within the sacredness of an *I-Thou* relation. Essentially, what is lost between bodies, both human and ecclesial, is the interrelatedness necessary to reveal and sustain the whole. Or, to put it another way, the simple act of naming the other as 'Thou' disrupts the assumption of being the central axis (or locus) and, in doing so, alters relations between bodies. As highlighted by Haim Gordon, the ontology of Buber's *I-Thou* is thus understood within a reliance on interdependence that resists the Kantian subject-object position that sustains much of the dualistic modalities of contemporary growth imperatives.¹⁷⁵ As such, what happens *between* participants is crucial to ultimately bringing us into a relationship with God, whom Buber

¹⁷³ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (London, England: Bloomsbury, 2013), 7.

¹⁷⁴ Buber, *I and Thou*, 7.

¹⁷⁵ Haim Gordon, *The Heidegger-Buber Controversy: The Status of the I-Thou* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2001), 116.

frames as the *Eternal Thou*. It should be noted that whilst Buber's fundamental distinction between the primary word I–Thou (wholistic) and the primary word I–It (partial) remains mutually exclusive, much like Heidegger's view of human-technological relations, Buber concedes that the dominant relation between people and the world succumbs to the realm of I–It. This, he contends, is the inevitable disintegration of relations replete in a liberal society. He writes:

The life of human beings is not passed in the sphere of transitive verbs alone. It does not exist in virtue of activities alone which have some thing for their object. I perceive something. I am sensible of something. I imagine something. I will something. I feel something. I think something. The life of human beings does not consist of all this and the like alone. This and the like together establish the realm of It. But the realm of Thou has a different basis.¹⁷⁶

Buber concludes that, as a living being, Thou is not a *thing* and, as such, remains unbound, free from the mechanisms of reduction or categorisation (dismembering). Accordingly, the 'realm of It' frames the other through *experience*, which inadvertently creates an opaque sense of the other. Conversely, the 'realm of Thou' only becomes fully visible when one person engages unreservedly and without judgment. In this way, as Gordon summarises, 'the realm of the Thou is the realm in which I relate with my whole being'.¹⁷⁷ For Buber, the extrinsic desire to categorise (atomise) or instrumentalise any form of human activity immediately obscures the possibility of being known as *Thou*, and instead is a reductive encounter of becoming no more than an object (an It). When taken to its full conclusion, this obviates the fullest sense of knowing God as the other—as the ultimate and Eternal Thou. We are again reminded that we do not just have a body (It), we are a body (Thou). In effect, the origins of physicalism within managerialism as an organising logic for the church imports a reductionist view that inherently dismembers the body of Christ as a thing that can be dismantled, stored, and consumed on demand.

¹⁷⁶ Buber, *I and Thou*, 4.

¹⁷⁷ Gordon, *The Heidegger–Buber Controversy*, 117.

Suffering sustainability

This refusal to reduce a person to an object opens the way for James Nelson's account of care as an embodied, hospitable encounter. Nelson explores the possibility of transforming the nature of care from one of medicalisation (mechanisation) to that of hospitality, whereby we learn to love our neighbours and ourselves as fully 'bodyselves' (a term Nelson uses to express the polar-opposite of the body-machine). He distinguishes between suffering (as a loss of integration) and pain (as a bodily sensation), suggesting that reception of the other in their entirety, as a whole person, is the necessary condition to experience any relief from suffering and, on occasion, pain.

I am always interpreting myself as a body, creating my meanings as a body, and using images and language to give significance to my bodily functions and dysfunctions, states of health and disease. [...] Too often, we have been taught by culture, religion, and medicine that our bodies are something quite different from our real selves. We have learned that our real selves exist in our minds or our spirits while our bodies are intricate machines. When we act on that assumption (whether we are medical professionals or just anyone experiencing disease) we do not relieve suffering, but rather compound it.¹⁷⁸

In the context of the church, the assumption compounding the suffering of the ecclesial body is the managerial logic of 'sustainability' underpinning the RR programme, which inadvertently creates a loss of integration with the wider church. Conversely, Paul's depiction of the church as the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12) subverts the notion that certain members (or congregations) hold greater worth based on their perceived utility or productivity (growth). Just as Reinders critiques the reduction of personhood to purposive agency, Paul warns against the dismembering of the body when some parts are deemed unnecessary or insignificant. The insistence on viability through measurable success fragments the church in a way analogous to the I-It reduction of human beings described by Buber. Rather than existing as a holistic, interdependent community, the church risks becoming an assemblage of isolated, performance-driven units. In contrast to this organising logic is the theological vision of the body of Christ that insists that all members,

¹⁷⁸ James B. Nelson, *Body Theology* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 124.

regardless of contribution, belong and are indispensable. To define ecclesial viability through institutional metrics is, therefore, to sever the church from its true identity—a body not sustained by its own efforts but by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. In this light, the very language of ‘sustainability’ as applied to the church echoes the mechanistic reduction of personhood critiqued by Nelson, further underscoring the need for a theological, rather than merely functional, conception of the church. Surveying this same body-mind dualism, Reinders captures the integrity and wholeness that we see replete in Buber’s primary word I-Thou that instinctively rejects the gaze of an inward turn. He surmises:

If anything important is to be learned from being with a profoundly disabled person, it is precisely to learn how to be human, theologically speaking, without relying on the reflective self as our inner core. As human beings, our vocation is friendship with God, but usually our reflective self gets in the way of trusting God. Being with an intellectually disabled person teaches us precisely this painful lesson. It paves the way for our friendship both with them and with God by teaching us that we can only give friendship after we have learned to receive it.¹⁷⁹

The suffering presence of the other is not something to be ignored or overcome but instead received in friendship. Or, as Hauerwas points out, ‘suffering makes people’s otherness stand out in strong relief, but that otherness is exactly the condition necessary to force recognition of them and of ourselves’.¹⁸⁰ Further to this, Rowan Williams highlights Saint Paul’s appeal to the Corinthian church that introduces a communal dimension to suffering by addressing ‘the church as a unit in which sickness or malfunction belongs always to the community as a whole’.¹⁸¹ The weak and vulnerable are to be received corporeally as part of the whole. The body does not seek to become dismembered as and when there is sickness or distortion but rather seeks healing and health through its unity. Accordingly, within this culture of faithfulness and care, failure is both anticipated and accommodated. Williams points out that it is only in extreme cases that Paul suggests expulsion (‘amputation’) of members, reserved only for those who refuse any ‘public acknowledgement’

¹⁷⁹ Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship*, 225.

¹⁸⁰ Stanley Hauerwas, *Suffering Presence: Theological Reflections on Medicine, the Mentally Handicapped, and the Church* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), 25.

¹⁸¹ Williams, “On Being a Human Body,” 410.

of harm to the body of Christ. Further to this, and despite the potential friction of difference between diverse peoples, Saint Paul admonishes members to share in the concern of one another, open to the vulnerabilities of a group often on the verge of fragmentation and needing mutual care. As Williams observes: 'Living in the church entails the difficult knowledge that my identity as a believer is not my business alone and that I am affected by the failure of another'.¹⁸² This brings us back to the primacy of 'I-Thou' relations and the essential nature of what happens *between* people. As Buber suggests:

The *Thou* meets me. But I step into direct relation with it. Hence the relation means being chosen and choosing, suffering and action in one; just as any action of the whole being, which means the suspension of all partial actions and consequently of all sensations of actions grounded only in their particular limitation, is bound to resemble suffering.¹⁸³

As we have seen throughout, the intelligibility of being *with* and suffering alongside one another is the relational 'logic' of the corporeal body called 'church'. Percy suggests much the same: if this choosing places the 'heterodoxy of numerical growth at the heart of the church' rather than prioritising relationality and care, the very fibre and character of the church begins reflecting the body-machine, validated by the calculus of cost versus benefit.

As Percy cautions:

We know that God counts generously. The poor, the lame, the sick, the sinners; all are promised a place at God's table in his kingdom. That's why Jesus was seldom interested in quantity; the kingdom is about small numbers and enriching quality [...] God's maths is different to ours, and God does not easily concur with our cultural obsessions with "growth equals success." No one denies the urgency of mission, and of the church addressing numerical growth. But faithfulness must always be put before the search for success. So, the key to understanding numerical church growth might be to engage in some deeper and more discerning readings of our contexts— the very soil we seek to nourish and bless, so the seeds can flourish.¹⁸⁴

It is this soil, the gift of faith in bodies less recognised, that we will address in the next chapter. As we have observed, if the lives of those with disabilities are framed by the normative images of the fully independent, autonomous self, then our ability to recognise the intelligibility of humanity, marked by profound disability, begins to challenge what it

¹⁸² Williams, "On Being a Human Body," 411.

¹⁸³ Buber, *I and Thou*, 8–9.

¹⁸⁴ Percy, "Growth and Management in the Church of England," 238.

means for a human life to be considered viable. By thinking of the church in these same terms, a hermeneutic of disability begins to expose the market-driven language of the RR programme that terms eucharistic communities in need of care as being ‘unsustainable’.

Before moving into the next chapter, it is worth refracting this summary through a final vignette from Christopher de Vinck, who tells the story of Oliver, his profoundly disabled older brother, who could neither speak nor feed himself. Having been deeply shaped through the daily routines of care and attentiveness necessary to meet his brother’s needs, years after his death, de Vinck concludes: ‘Oliver still remains the most hopeless human being I ever met, the weakest human being I ever met, and yet he was one of the most powerful human beings I ever met.’¹⁸⁵ Despite his outward limitation, Oliver revealed a paradox of power, one that precluded capability and productivity for the profound transformative effect of care upon those who loved him. Oliver’s life exemplified the sacredness of human existence, reframing power as relational and transformative rather than being individualistic or linear. In this regard, de Vinck is instructive in guiding our attention towards redressing the use of language such as ‘sustainability’ as an ecclesial objective within the Church of England. In this light, Oliver’s life challenges the notion that worth is measured by autonomy or productivity, instead revealing a ‘contributive worth’ rooted in relational interdependence.

Summary

This understanding of dependence calls us to reconsider how the church values its members, particularly those deemed less ‘productive’. As we turn to examine this transformative power of mutual care, what begins to emerge is a theological vision that refuses to reduce personhood—or the life of the church—to instrumental categories of usefulness, growth, or

¹⁸⁵ Christopher de Vinck, *The Power of the Powerless* (Kent: Hodder and Stoughton, 1989), 12.

measurable success. The witness of Kelly and others with profound disabilities exposes the fragility of any anthropology (ecclesial or otherwise) that equates viability with productive agency. In their vulnerability, they embody an I–Thou relationality that resists fragmentation and affirms belonging without condition, mirroring Paul’s vision of the body of Christ in which every member is indispensable. By contrast, the managerial logic embedded within the RR programme risks dismembering the ecclesial body, rendering some communities ‘unsustainable’ in the same way that certain human lives are deemed less than fully human. Against this reductionism, the church is called to a hermeneutic of disability—a way of seeing and being that centres interdependence, hospitality, and the reception of the other as gift. Such a hermeneutic not only challenges market-driven notions of sustainability but reorients ecclesial life towards faithfulness, where the worth of the body is found not in its output but in the Spirit who animates and sustains it.

Mechanistic embodiment: *The contributory principle of human worth*

Introduction

Through a growing concern for declining numbers, fostered in part by social pressures, we have seen that the Church of England (CofE) response, through the *Renewal and Reform* (RR) programme has given rise to the use of rational ‘goods’ inherent within corporate culture and organisational methodologies. Namely, that efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control make the growing church both plausible and appealing. Yet, as John Drane points out, this same appeal towards output, experience, or a quasi-spiritual ‘product’ puts the church at risk of becoming co-opted by market forces that ultimately dismember and distort its identity and meaning, akin to that of a vending machine dispensing spiritual services and goods.¹⁸⁶ As such, when applied to the body called ‘church’, these same market principles reduce the ecclesial body to a language of systems and operations. In turn, these machinations obviate complexity, reducing the dynamics of the church to the calculable, binary modes of input and output. This reminds us of Taylor’s critique of the mechanistic account of human flourishing, where the governing logic of modern life is increasingly viewed through a lens of formal operations. Additionally, this construal of mechanising language is something that Rowan Williams observes as the erosion of the spatial intelligence of the body, stating: ‘We are generally still so hypnotised by mechanical analogies that we cannot see the difference between describing (and operating) any other system in the world and acting as a body.’¹⁸⁷ Much like Taylor’s

¹⁸⁶ John Drane, *The McDonaldization of the Church: Spirituality, Creativity, and the Future of the Church* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2000), 3–4.

¹⁸⁷ Williams, “On Being a Human Body,” 405.

computer model of the mind, the difference between *operating* as a body and *acting* as a body belies the assumption that participation within any mechanism might bring desired (predictable) outcomes. Accordingly, where congregational growth becomes the primary focus of the church, the diocesan response is to enact mechanisms (organising logic) designed to proffer calculable results. The RR programme is, in this respect, an example of this same logic.

As Martyn Percy observes, congregational engagement in English churches can therefore be understood to correlate with one of two dominant European religious economies. Either the ‘market model’, through which individuals self-select membership, or a model of ‘utility’, by which all belong by default unless they actively opt-out. Both are a choice, but the market model is becoming the increasingly normative approach to the growth language of the church (similar to Fitzmaurice’s notion of an acquisitive, or ‘having-mode’). Percy further frames these models as ‘intensive’ and ‘extensive’ respectively, reflecting broader principles that can be readily seen in social contract theory.¹⁸⁸

By engaging social contract theory through phenomenological accounts of embodiment, this section interrogates the implicit ‘contributory principle’ that guides ecclesial decision-making and resource allocation. It thus highlights the theological and ethical costs of equating worth with productivity, and in doing so prepares the ground for a counter-imaginary rooted not in contribution but in care—an interdependent vision of the body of Christ where each member’s value rests in their being rather than their output.

Contribution as the measure of worth

Rooted in the works of thinkers like Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, social contract theory explores how citizens consent—either explicitly or

¹⁸⁸ Percy, *Shaping the Church*, 72–73.

implicitly—to collective governance and societal structures in exchange for certain rights and protections. This interplay between collective belonging and individual choice mirrors the same tensions between sectarian religious participation and voluntary engagement based on a socialised model of the church. Underpinning these dynamics is the late-modern liberal conception of the individual, in which autonomy and self-governance become essentialised as the defining traits of personhood. As such, liberal theories of democracy and justice, exemplified by John Rawls, thus situate self-governance within individual autonomy, making personal sovereignty central to democratic legitimacy. Applied to the Christian community, the rise of market models and instrumental rationality in church engagement then mirrors broader societal shifts towards voluntary association and personal agency, aligning the church with the liberal-democratic principle that legitimate participation requires consent rather than assumed belonging. Or to put it another way, you need to turn up each Sunday to belong. Religious affiliation is thus increasingly framed as a matter of choice rather than inheritance, reflecting political norms of autonomous engagement. In this assessment, the church is not insulated from its sociopolitical context but instead, becomes reconfigured by an anthropocentric telos, whereby human flourishing—formerly conceived through divine providence—is now reframed in terms of social and economic utility.

Prior to the likes of Adam Smith and Locke, Taylor notes that human flourishing by divine providence was understood to be God’s mysterious (benign) guidance towards ultimate salvation. But by the eighteenth-century, providence became increasingly bound to human flourishing within an immanent order, most clearly expressed through economic self-regulation and social stability. Taylor observes that through this shift, God’s provision is reified by a need to create a stabilised society bound by ‘interlocking causes’ rather than a mystery ‘of harmonized meanings’.¹⁸⁹ Accordingly, human flourishing becomes reframed as

¹⁸⁹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 177.

citizens ‘engaged in an exchange of services’, circumscribing God’s providential concern for the cosmos within an anthropocentric economic model.¹⁹⁰ As Taylor notes, the dilemma this creates for the church means that ‘God’s goals for us shrink to the single end of our encompassing this order of mutual benefit he has designed for us’.¹⁹¹ Yet if God’s providential concern for order is reduced to an ‘economic’ order with moral order rationalising providence, aligning it with human agency, the risk is a form of Pelagianism, whereby divine action is no longer perceived as transcendent but embedded within natural laws and economic mechanisms. This transformation, Taylor argues, is a form of ‘disenchantment’ that reflects the secularisation of religious thought, as theological concepts become reshaped to justify and reinforce emerging capitalist structures.¹⁹²

This shift from a theocentric vision of providence to an anthropocentric framework grounded in economic and social utility reshapes religious thought and redefines assumptions about human worth and participation in institutional life. As religious engagement becomes increasingly voluntaristic, reflecting liberal-democratic ideals of individual agency, the church, in turn, risks absorbing market logics that privilege productivity and instrumental rationality. Such dynamics parallel the assumptions of social contract theories that marginalise those who fall outside the ideal of the rational, autonomous agent. In much the same way that these theories struggle to account for individuals with impairments, religious institutions shaped by market rationality may also reproduce exclusionary practices that normalise contribution and output as the basis of belonging. If providence is framed primarily in terms of stabilising economic and social order, the church risks obscuring the value of those who cannot be quantified within such metrics. This raises critical theological and ethical questions: to what extent does an

¹⁹⁰ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 177.

¹⁹¹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 221.

¹⁹² Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 269.

economic model of flourishing demand measurable gain from the ‘viable’ church? And how might the church resist such reductionism by reasserting participation and care over utility? To begin addressing these questions, we now turn to examine the consequences of conflating providence with economic utility through the lens of social contract theory’s conception of the body.

Tracing a ‘contributory principle’ of human worth

In her book *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership*, Martha Nussbaum explores the limitations of social contract theories by highlighting the issues raised when caring for those with impairments or disabilities. She examines different versions of social contract theories, noting that many start with egoistic rationality, with some seeking to overcome this self-interest by incorporating some form of moral impartiality (for reasons of mutual benefit, as noted above). Through a sequence of case studies of children and adults with physical and mental disability, Nussbaum sustains her critique of Rawls’ contractarian theory, which she asserts obfuscates the breadth of human identity and capability.¹⁹³ In part, this is due to Rawls’ *Veil of Ignorance*, the hypothetical construct designed to generate principles of justice free from contingent biases. Assuming a pre-foetal, ‘original position’, individuals behind the veil are stripped of knowledge regarding their future social status, natural endowments, or particular life circumstances. In this state of unknowns, individuals must then determine the foundational principles of justice suitable to govern all members of a given society. Deprived of privileging their own interests, Rawls argues that rational agents would be inclined to endorse principles that secure basic liberties, ensure fair equality of opportunity, and protect the least advantaged. In this way, the *Veil* serves as a mechanism for deriving justice as fairness, structuring a social

¹⁹³ Martha C. Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership*, 1st ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 96–98.

order in which legitimacy is grounded in impartial deliberation rather than arbitrary advantage. However, whilst Rawls' version is unique to the extent that it seeks a more just society based on the constraints of the *Veil*, Nussbaum points out that, regardless of morality, each theory assumes an equality of power and capacity among *contracting* parties, modelled by rationally competent adults. Essentially, deviation from this normative position is lacking in the theory. As such, the working assumption of 'normal' variations and 'productive' citizens in social contract theories invariably leads to the exclusion or marginalisation of people with impairments and disabilities. Conversely, Nussbaum argues that when provided with supportive conditions, individuals with impairments contribute to society in a way that challenges the factual accuracy of social contract theorists' assumptions.

Through the inherent complexities of disability, she further identifies how expectations of productivity and contribution become euphemistically unsustainable within the social contract, highlighting the degree to which societies are thus revealed to be preconfigured in such a way that 'people with mental impairments are not among those for whom and in reciprocity with whom society's basic institutions are structured'.¹⁹⁴ She concludes the ensuing effacement of any citizen with impairment or disability is thus a 'serious flaw in modern theories that conceive of basic political principles as the result of a contract for mutual advantage'.¹⁹⁵ Essentially, a principle of *contributive worth* remains implicit within institutional life. In this regard, church polity is no different and susceptible to becoming complicit with these same social arrangements.

By exposing this principle, Nussbaum further asserts that human justice is, therefore, dependent upon recognising all citizens as being equal through the continuity of care and education, regardless of their capability or production. As such, any just society promotes

¹⁹⁴ Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice*, 98.

¹⁹⁵ Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice*, 98.

the health and education of individuals within the spheres of both social and political life. Additionally, she notes that this just society would also be quick to recognise the burden of care placed on those whose efforts often go unpaid and unrecognised as a means of production or work.¹⁹⁶ In particular, alongside similar feminist critiques from Eva Feder Kittay, Cynthia Stark, and Kari Wærness, she connects these concerns to questions of gender justice, highlighting the extent to which caregivers—predominantly women—are assumed to undertake such labour ‘out of love’, thereby rendering their work invisible and diminishing their recognised contribution to civic and political life.¹⁹⁷

This may, at first, seem tangential to the church, but comparisons with the demographics of ageing and faithful members of the Church of England are not without parallels to the same feminist critique. Ultimately, the issue at stake for Nussbaum is the logic of a social contract theory (as conceived by the likes of Locke, Hume, Rawls, or Gauthier) to idealise rationality and thus stigmatise and exclude those with ‘unusual need or impairment’.¹⁹⁸ Overall, Nussbaum advocates for a more comprehensive and inclusive ‘capabilities approach’, asserting that meeting the needs of individuals with impairments is fundamental to building any just society, stating:

If people are making a cooperative arrangement for mutual advantage, they will want to get together with those from cooperation with whom they may expect to gain, not those who will demand unusual and expensive attention without contributing anything much to the social product, thus depressing the level of society’s well-being.¹⁹⁹

When considering the needs of poorer parishes or those with significantly strained resources across multi-benefice parishes, the extent to which the organising logic of the Archbishops’ Council adopts this same contractarian impulse of cooperative arrangement

¹⁹⁶ Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice*, 100.

¹⁹⁷ Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice*, 102; Eva Feder Kittay, *Love’s Labor: Essays on Women, Equality and Dependency*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2020), x; Kari Wærness, “Caring as Women’s Work in the Welfare State,” in *Patriarchy in a Welfare Society*, ed. Harriet Holter (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1984), 85–86.

¹⁹⁸ Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice*, 104.

¹⁹⁹ Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice*, 104.

becomes evident. The formula systems used to determine the level of Parish Share (funds given by the local church to the diocese) or grants to fund projects and maintain parish ministry are calculated on measurable performance (a ‘cooperative arrangement’ of sorts). Under these conditions, what a parish contributes is, in effect, a mark of its productive value to the diocese. Whilst this does not obfuscate any sense that parish clergy or the church community are valued by theological sentiment, nevertheless, the overriding operational procedures speak volumes about the dynamic of what is measured and what, ultimately, becomes valued.

There have been attempts to revise these funding formulas, most notably in 2014, when the Archbishops’ Council deployed a task force to review the future use of national church funding (from 2017 to 2026) with the explicit aim of enhancing accountability and ensuring the church Commissioners’ charitable goals were met by posing the question: ‘what investment must we make to achieve the ambition of growth?’²⁰⁰ Consequently, amongst several key points, the ensuing report entitled ‘Resourcing the Future’ (2015) surmised:

- The current [formula-based] ways by which the church’s national funding is distributed have only a superficial link to growth and have failed the poorest communities. A large amount of money is subsidising decline.
- In future, all of the funding distributed to dioceses should be investment for mission and growth. Half of the sum available should be earmarked for the support and development of mission in the poorest communities. Half should be for the pro-active investment in new growth opportunities.²⁰¹

In response, the report proposed two equal funding streams: ‘Lowest Income Communities’ (LInC) Funding and the ‘Strategic Development Funding’ (SDF), which brought significant changes to financial measures by ‘removing the current formula systems which provide mechanical, ineffective subsidy and replacing them with investment focused on fulfilling dioceses’ strategic plans for growth, and with a strong bias towards the poor.’²⁰²

²⁰⁰ General Synod, *Resourcing the Future*, 2.

²⁰¹ General Synod, *Resourcing the Future*, 1, para. 4.

²⁰² General Synod, *Resourcing the Future*, 1, para. 4.

However, whilst the moral imperative of a ‘strong bias towards the poor’ evokes language akin to the ‘preferential option of the poor’ as advanced by liberation theology, it rather belies that of a Rawlsian instinct, implicitly assuming a fair distribution of resource only needs to be temporal until such a time as the parish is renewed (reformed) once more as a contributing (growing) church. Under these conditions, the cooperative arrangement of contractarianism remains evidently operative. The question this raises for an ecclesial polity is one of economic worth. Is it plausible within the ecology of a diocese that some parishes may always remain dependent (cf. financial support)? If so, in what way might that be problematic for the CofE in seeking a just distribution of resources and operational desire to exercise a ‘strong bias towards the poor’? To explore the implications of this question, the intersection between theology, politics, and disability becomes an essential approach to shedding light on what it means to be and become an ecclesial body in contemporary society under the cross-pressures of growth and a commitment towards the production of social goods.

As we will explore in Part II, to reclaim such an ontology of care is to resist the reduction of providence to economic utility, to refuse the lure of acquisitive ecclesiology, and to orient the church’s self-understanding towards the givenness of God’s life with and for creation. This movement from a market logic of contribution to a logic of care marks a decisive shift in ecclesial imagination—away from a calculus of worth and towards an interdependent vision in which every member of the body is indispensable, not for what they produce, but for who they are in Christ. In this way, the church may embody a counter-imaginary—one in which worth is not conferred by measurable contribution, but recognised in the very fact of being, sustained by the God who gives growth (1 Cor 3.6-7). As Grant Macaskill argues, the church’s starting point cannot be contribution or capacity, but the recognition that all persons are received as gifts within the body of Christ. Accordingly,

even those whose lives carry diminished social capital within prevailing measures of ability or contribution:

[...] are valuable because they have been chosen by God and given to the body of Christ. They will enrich the community, which would in important ways be dismembered by their absence, but this cannot be judged only in terms of the contribution that we would expect them to make. It can never be reduced to utility.²⁰³

Macaskill's account directly confronts the contributory logic underpinning the operative rationale of CofE funding formulas noted above by locating value not in what can be rendered or returned, but in the givenness of persons as gifts within the body of Christ. In doing so, it exposes the limits of participation construed in terms of measurable contribution, and gestures towards an ecclesial ontology in which the parish church is not engaged in modes of competition but rooted in gift.

From contribution to competition

In her book *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity*, Kathryn Tanner addresses the idea of human agency and the modern emphasis on conflict and process in human history. In particular, she traces a theology of non-competition, framing the relationship between God and creatures as one of a fecund provider and created recipients. From the beginning, between God's action and our agency, there exists an asymmetric and transcendent divide that, in turn, implicates gift-giving as the primary causality. As such, Tanner proposes that a 'simple contrast between activity and passivity will not do for creatures' relations with God because no matter how active one is as a creature, one is never anything other than the recipient of God's active grace—God remains active over all'.²⁰⁴ Accordingly, if our authentic being-in-the-world comes through active engagement, then liturgical participation must reflect this

²⁰³ Grant Macaskill, *Autism and the Church: Bible, Theology, and Community* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2019), 96.

²⁰⁴ Kathryn Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity: A Brief Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 4.

same asymmetry between divine and human agency, whereby God remains the supreme agent.

One way of conceiving this correlation between human agency and divine involvement is through what Kjetil Kringlebotten reclaims as a Christian *theurgy*. As a metaphysical participation in divine action, only made possible by God's descent through the incarnation, Kringlebotten notes that theurgy focuses most specifically on active participation in the liturgy, which he contends should rightly be understood as our engagement in God's actions rather than our fervent (extrinsic) efforts (i.e. something that God is already doing).²⁰⁵ This, he contends, accords with Aquinas' understanding of causality, distinguishing between primary and secondary causes, which assumes (as Tanner asserts) that all created beings derive their existence and agency from God, as the ultimate cause of all actions. Key to this scheme is that creatures retain their own actions, ensuring that free will and agency are not rendered purposeless. However, this agency does not function independently of God's causation; rather, creatures act as instruments of divine agency, akin to a chisel fulfilling the intention of the sculptor's action. Commenting on this Thomistic account of participation, Kringlebotten notes that:

God and creation are not two causes standing in competition, or even two distinct foci of reality, but different dimensions of causality, where the ultimate cause "influences" the latter. God gives a creature its power to operate and God works, immanently, through the creature. And the creature operates only secondarily, in virtue of God's operation.²⁰⁶

Accordingly, Aquinas positions his view between the poles of *occasionalism* (God's transcendence in absolute power), denying creaturely agency, and a mode of *participationist* (naturalising God's imminence), that assumes equality between creator and creation as of co-creators.

²⁰⁵ Kjetil Kringlebotten, *Liturgy, Theurgy, and Active Participation: On Theurgic Participation in God* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2023), 10–12.

²⁰⁶ Kringlebotten, *Liturgy, Theurgy, and Active Participation*, 32.

Instead, for reasons of developing a *theuristic* mode of participation, Kringlebotten highlights the way in which Aquinas affirms God working immanently through his creatures, enabling them to act whilst also maintaining their ontological dependence upon him. This aligns with the Thomistic principle that ‘action follows being’ (*agere sequitur esse*), which explains how a creature’s essence (*actus primus*) underlies its operations (*actus secundus*). Essentially, the way something acts is determined by what it is. Furthermore, given that potentiality requires actualisation by something already *actual*, all change ultimately necessitates God as ‘pure act’, making the telos of secondary causation forever dependent on divine primary causation. This, Kringlebotten asserts, ‘points us to the concept of potency and act, where we only have these perfections *potentially* before we get them *actually*’.²⁰⁷

In Thomistic terms, the church, therefore, has the potential (in potency) to grow (in act) but can only do so by the primary causation of God. The implication being that any plans or strategy for church growth (as a secondary cause) can only ever find effervescence through the primary causation of God already at work. The question this raises of church growth methodologies and the organising logic of the RR programme is one orientated towards potency (vision) and act (the reality). Read in light of the account of managerial rationality in Chapter 1.2, where optimisation, measurability, and control come to function as governing assumptions, a distinction emerges between managing and managerialism: to manage is to attend to what is given and participate in the fecundity of divine action, whereas managerialism seeks to produce universalised outcomes through the imposition of technique, reducing growth to productivity rather than receiving it as gift. However, by implication, whilst any notion of competition (or cooperation) between God and creatures remains theologically untenable, performative relationships between creatures are

²⁰⁷ Kringlebotten, *Liturgy, Theurgy, and Active Participation*, 33.

continually exposed to linear power dynamics, which anticipates a zero-sum game with winners and losers. As Tanner notes:

Non-competitiveness among creatures — their co-operation on the same plane of causality — always brings with it the potential for competition: Since I perform part of what needs to be done and you perform the rest, to the extent I act, you need not; and the more I act, the less you need to.²⁰⁸

This contrast between passivity and participation recalls the same dilemma of distributive justice identified by Cynthia Stark. Questions surrounding the imbalance of caregiving, or what Stark notes as ‘the fully cooperating assumption,’ that all citizens will have the same capability or capacity to participate fully within schemes of production.²⁰⁹ The implication being that passivity (dependence) is not an option within the competition for shared goods. Macaskill furthers this view by drawing attention to the relationship between autism and the church, highlighting how participation and worth are conflated by society's normative expectations. He notes that regardless of whether ‘it is recognized or not, the ascription of value is competitive—some win and some lose—and the rules of the competition are generally social and economic’.²¹⁰

The church is not immune to this same conception of society. Despite the designation of funds allocated by the RR Programme to aid churches in need of financial support, a correlation to Stark's dependency critique can be drawn with poorer parishes (whose Parish Share falls below the formulated contribution) in competition for the same pot of money. Funding is made available by a competitive bidding process for finite resources metered to those parishes capable of demonstrating their intentionality and strategic plans of growth. Without intention, the effect this has upon those parishes and clergy lacking the resources to make a successful bid diminishes their participation as being less cooperative and,

²⁰⁸ Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity*, 3–4.

²⁰⁹ Cynthia A. Stark, “How to Include the Severely Disabled in a Contractarian Theory of Justice,” *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 15, no. 2 (2007): 127.

²¹⁰ Macaskill, *Autism and the Church: Bible, Theology, and Community*, 81.

therefore, less deserving of shared goods. This is evidenced most clearly by the latest report from the Church of England's longitudinal research project, 'Living Ministry', which began in 2017 by following four cohorts of clergy through ten years of their ministry. The latest set of findings (Wave 4, February 2024), *Holding Things Together: Church of England Clergy in Changing Times*, reports clergy suffering from increased financial anxiety, emotional isolation, and, in some cases, possible clinical depression.²¹¹ It is a sobering read and serves to highlight the extent to which current diocesan support structures fail to account for the sorts of inevitable dependencies that Stark identifies within neo-liberal society. Care under these conditions is a competition where only the fittest may flourish.

In contrast, if we return to a *theuristic* mode of participation within the Thomistic account of the body whereby creatures are brought into being and preserved in being by God, whose 'pure act' gives the growth (1 Cor 3.6-8), then any competitive relations begin to make little sense in light of God's transcendence. As Tanner would assert, if we conflate our actions with the actions of God (as co-authors), we obscure any sense that God is ultimately 'the giver of all gifts' and the reality of the non-competitive relation between God and creatures.²¹² This tension between competition and cooperation within the CofE's support structures exposes a deeper ecclesiological problem. If competitive logics of resources and recognition continue to shape the experience of clergy and congregations, how can the church understand itself as a body in relation to divine agency and human participation when that body is no longer imagined to be fit or capable? This, in turn, raises questions about how the RR programme conceptualises embodiment and participation. Here, 'body theology' becomes instructive, offering a counterpoint to hierarchical and competitive models by emphasising the church as an embodied community in Christ.

²¹¹ Fiona Tweedie and Liz Graveling, *Holding Things Together: Church of England Clergy in Changing Times*, The Church of England (The Archbishops' Council, February 2024), 48.

²¹² Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity*, 4.

Body theology

In the modern era, including within the Church of England, the theological method has characteristically proceeded from a 'top down' rather than from the lived realities of congregations. Such an approach reflects a historical ecclesiology that Roger Haight describes as 'an ecclesiology from above'—an abstract methodology that is both idealist and ahistorical, aligned with a high Christology—by which authority is located at the level of abstract doctrine rather than embodied practice or experience.²¹³ Accordingly, the traditional deployment of the church-as-body metaphor has often replicated this hierarchical ordering. In contrast, James Nelson identifies this historical neglect of embodiment within the Christian tradition and develops a 'body theology' that proceeds from concrete, situated experience. This constitutes a methodological reversal, privileging what Haight also develops as 'an ecclesiology from below' that seeks to account for the 'whole Christian movement.'²¹⁴ As Nelson surmises:

The task of body theology is critical reflection on our bodily experience as a fundamental realm of the experience of God. It is not, in the first instance, a theological description of bodily life from a supra-bodily vantage point (as if that were possible, which in actuality it is not). Nor is it primarily concerned with articulating norms or the proper "use" of the body. Body theology necessarily begins with the concreteness of our bodily experience, even while it recognizes that this very concreteness is filtered through the interpretive web of meanings that we have come to attach to our bodily life.²¹⁵

At a surface level, this could sound, at best, overly sentimental or, at worse, innately tautological. But this would betray the possibility of bodies being (and becoming) an active source of meaning, in and of themselves. As such, Nelson rejects any medicalised or dualistic conception of the 'body-object' and instead locates body theology within the visceral position of 'body-subject' that offers the possibility of a further nuanced understanding of the people of God interpreted through the 'web of meanings' or social

²¹³ Roger Haight, *Historical Ecclesiology*, 3 vols., vol. 1, *Christian Community in History*, (New York London: Continuum, 2004), 21.

²¹⁴ Haight, *Historical Ecclesiology*, 1, 58.

²¹⁵ Nelson, *Body Theology*, 43.

imaginary of contemporary life. Whilst acknowledging the limitations of his subjective methodology, Nelson retains meaning through an implicit Heideggerian phenomenology of being-in-the-world where decisions cannot remain abstracted or unreal, given the relational implications affecting the moral and social life of those making them, the implications of which will be explored further in Chapter Five, particularly as it relates to bishops.

Nelson's emphasis on embodied experience as a theological starting point thus raises broader epistemological questions about how meaning is derived and understood within ecclesiological discourse. If bodily experience is not merely incidental but foundational to theological reflection, then the mechanisms through which experience is interpreted become crucial. This shift necessitates an engagement with broader interpretative frameworks that account for the ways in which meaning is constructed. In this regard, two dominant theoretical perspectives emerge—*social constructionism* and *essentialism*—each offering distinct insights into how bodily experience informs theological understanding.

The social constructionist view takes into account the symbolic dimensions of cultures and subcultures in the sense-making process of experience. An example of this would be Clifford Geertz's interpretation of the 'wink of an eye', which distinguishes between social codes whereby 'twitches, winks, fake-winks, parodies, re-hearsals of parodies are produced, perceived, and interpreted', noting that each may look the same physically but carry entirely different meanings depending on the cultural and social interpretation.²¹⁶ Geertz maintains that meaning is, therefore, not inherent in objects or actions but instead is created through social interactions and cultural contexts—meaning is not objective but culturally constructed—an action only gains significance through the shared understandings of a

²¹⁶ Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 7.

particular society. This 'thick description' contrasts with more positivist approaches that seek universal, context-independent explanations for human behaviour.

In contrast, essentialism attends to intrinsic meaning and objectivity. Identities, behaviours, and meanings are inherent, fixed, and independent of social or cultural interpretation. Whereas Geertz's analysis of the 'wink of an eye' illustrates meaning contingent upon social context and interpretive frameworks, an essentialist perspective frames actions with intrinsic meaning that exist prior to and apart from social construction. The 'wink of an eye' would thus be universally understood as a sign of playfulness, flirtation, or secrecy. From an essentialist perspective, categories such as gender, race, or even modes of communication are understood to reflect inherent, biologically or metaphysically determined characteristics. This view assumes that cultural and social differences are expressions of deeper, immutable essences rather than contingent products of historical and social processes. It is this essentialist view that appears to be propagated by church growth and management-led leadership programmes in the church. The assumption being that the church, as an ecclesial body, is essentially the same in nature, requiring a sort of 'tuning' or 'adjustment' to align it with an almost quasi 'natural law' of the church.

Nelson contrasts this essentialist view of the body with a growing interest in a historiographical (contextualised) view of the body as an evolution of social construction throughout time. Accordingly, the body retains a potentiality (potency) rather than an absolute definition (act). As an example of this, he cites inconsistency of sexuality as the 'human potential for consciousness behaviour, and experience that can be developed and modified by social forces of definition, organisation, and control'.²¹⁷ For the purposes of developing a body theology, Nelson concludes that the challenge with both essentialist and constructionist views is that 'constructionism alone suggests spirit or mind without bodily

²¹⁷ Nelson, *Body Theology*, 47.

reality, and essentialism alone suggests body without spirit'.²¹⁸ This constructionist-essentialist polemic is one that Nelson seeks to resolve through a Niebuhrian *relationalism*, where competing views become complementary or retain a duality rather than a dualism. He asserts: 'meanings and values arise out of the *interaction* of our bodily reality and our interpretive capacities as social, relational beings'.²¹⁹

Conclusion

In light of the critiques explored throughout this chapter, it has become evident that the *Renewal and Reform* programme operates within an implicit logic of contributory worth—one that prioritises growth, productivity, and measurable outcomes—over a more ontological understanding of care. Drawing on the work of Nussbaum and Stark, we have seen how the contractarian impulse within the RR programme reflects broader societal structures that value individuals, communities, and institutions based on their ability to contribute in tangible and economically oriented ways. This mode of valuation inherently risks marginalising those who do not fit within its prescribed frameworks of viability, including parishes that struggle financially or demographically. By placing managerialist ecclesiologies—understood as accounts of the church shaped by market rationality, performance metrics, and strategic optimisation—into dialogue with political theologies and subjecting them to critique through a hermeneutic of disability, this chapter has examined how such logics are reshaping the ecclesiological contours of the Church of England. In response, by positioning care as an ontological reality rather than a transactional or acquisitive function, we begin to see an alternative ecclesiology emerging—one that resists collapsing vitality into measurable success by affirming the dignity of each community as being integral to the whole body of Christ. As Heidegger reminds us,

²¹⁸ Nelson, *Body Theology*, 48.

²¹⁹ Nelson, *Body Theology*, 49.

authentic care is not oriented towards desired future gains but is instead firmly rooted in the present and particular. In relation to the Church of England (CofE), this means engaging with the actual needs and realities of the parish as it is. Thus, the challenge for the CofE is not merely to reform its structures for the promotion of growth, but to cultivate a deeper theological and ethical commitment to care, one capable of embracing varying forms of dependency, even when there may be no prospect of return or alignment with the market-driven logics of growth.

In this way, the tension between growth and care is not merely a pragmatic issue but a theological and ecclesiological imperative. The church's identity is not predicated on its capacity to 'produce' disciples at an ever-increasing rate but on its fidelity to a vision of community shaped by grace, mutual responsibility, and a recognition of the intrinsic worth of every member. If the CofE is to embody a true image of the body of Christ, it must, therefore, resist any temptation to assess parishes through the lens of 'viability' and instead embrace the radical, countercultural call to care—an act that serves as a witness to the Gospel. In this way, a non-competitive framework would not merely redistribute resources but would reimagine the church's role as an ecclesial body in which participation is not predicated on institutional privilege or strategic capability but on the shared recognition of an ontological (primary) dependence on God. The challenge, then, is to develop an ecclesiology that resists the instrumentalisation of participation and instead recovers a vision of the church as an interdependent body, where growth is not a product of competitive enterprise but a manifestation of divine grace already at work. This call to reimagine ecclesial participation through the lens of care and relationality finds a crucial grounding through the hermeneutic of disability, which challenges normative assumptions about capability, value, and belonging within the body of Christ. It is towards this generative interdependence that we now turn.

PART II

Dependent Bodies: *Disability and the Ontology of Care*

CHAPTER 3.

Disabling Theology: *What difference does disability make?*

3.1

Disability and Theology: *Normalcy, models, and the church*

Introduction

We now move from Part I, which examined the numerical decline in the Church of England (narrated through the market logic of metrics, growth, and gain), to Part II, where the focus shifts to discerning an alternative organising logic. Here, the lens of care will begin to serve as the interpretive framework, inviting a reimagining of ecclesial life not in terms of competition and productivity, but through practices of mutuality, interdependence, and the shared work of sustaining the Christian community.

As we have seen in the previous chapter, within the theological interstice of the body and ecclesiology, of flesh and grace, the disabled body emerges not as an anomaly to be explained but as a revelatory site of theological and ontological significance. The extent to which a theology of growth privileges a normative ecclesial ideal—engendering a myopic stance towards parish churches situated at the peripheries of economic viability and numerical expansion—calls for a further exploration of growth programmes that sustain structural advantages for certain churches more than others.

In response, this chapter argues that the disabled body, far from being a deficit to be overcome, is an epistemic locus from which an ecclesiology of alterity and embodiment must begin. Such a claim necessitates a critical reappraisal of how bodies are perceived as being particular, different, and ultimately capable of authentically representing the body of Christ. The aim, therefore, is not an attempt at inclusion within existing structures of the church or the toleration of difference, but to begin working towards an ecclesiology that reconfigures the theological imagination of the body of Christ by taking seriously the

ontological claims made by those lives are marked by the label ‘disabled’. These claims are not about what the body lacks, but about what it *knows*, through the dynamic and lived human encounters of meaning-making between bodies and the world-as-it-is. This is about discovering how we might begin moving from a theology of disability towards a perspective of the church, as a body, *being* disabled. In short, this chapter seeks to open the path towards a liberatory ecclesiology of disability (which will be explored more fully in Chapter Five).

As a vibrant and growing field, disability theology is firmly rooted in liberation theology, fostering a dynamic interplay between Christology and social change. Intersecting with Black, womanist, feminist, and queer theologies, disability theology is no longer confined to Euro-American contexts but is increasingly informed by voices from the Global South and from across diverse denominational and ecclesial traditions. At its core, disability theology insists that disabled persons are not objects of theological reflection but relational subjects and agents of theological knowledge. As such, the field continues to challenge both the church and the academy to contend with the theological significance of embodiment, limitation, and interdependence. Critical to this commitment is the methodological approach of liberation theology, which centres on the voices and experiences of the marginalised, providing an essential corrective to theological perspectives that treat disability as a marginal metaphor or malady.

Central to this discussion is the role of models—both of disability and of the church—in shaping how bodies and communities are understood, valued, and welcomed. As Chapter 1.3 demonstrated in relation to ecclesiology, models are not merely descriptive but normative: they determine what counts as health, viability, participation, and good growth. In disability studies, competing models—the medical, social, rights-based, and limits models—perform the same work at the level of embodiment. Placing these in comparative dialogue exposes how underlying anthropologies of normalcy, capacity, and optimisation migrate between cultural and ecclesial imaginaries, shaping the church’s imagination of its

own body. Engaging critically with these models thus allows us to explore how assumptions embedded within them sustain or challenge normative ideals of health, wholeness, and ecclesial legitimacy (framed as ‘viability’ within the Church of England’s *Renewal and Reform* Programme). In this chapter, that exploration will take shape through the lens of Nicholas Healy’s practical-prophetic ecclesiology, which resists idealised or abstract accounts of the church in favour of a more grounded, historically attentive, and eschatologically oriented vision.

A constructive dialogue between models of disability and Healy’s practical-prophetic ecclesiology opens new possibilities for imagining a church not merely inclusive of disabled persons but reconfigured through their witness. This chapter, therefore, interrogates these models in order to sketch an ecclesial horizon shaped by the lived knowledge of disability. To situate this liberatory perspective within a broader theological landscape, we turn first to the parallel developments in societal attitudes that have shaped the cultural reception of disability.

Normative expectations

In recent decades, public infrastructure, including institutions, retail, transportation, and churches in the United Kingdom, and more broadly in Western society, has undergone adjustments and modifications to improve the experience and access for (some) people with disabilities. The introduction of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) in 1995 (superseded by the Equality Act 2010) helped to begin shaping public expectations, paving the way towards a more inclusive and equitable society by legally challenging discriminatory practices, promoting accessibility, and affirming the rights of disabled individuals across employment, education, transport, and public services. However, as Frances Mackenney-Jeffs notes, whilst the DDA ‘put disability firmly on the agenda’ for the church, the realities of participation and welcome for those with physical, learning, or sensory disabilities

remains uncontested.²²⁰ Brian Brock contends that whilst these changes have externalised necessary pragmatic modifications, they have inadvertently ‘stalled’ the internalised reception of the *other*, by ‘generating the illusion that interpersonal change is less important than infrastructural improvement.’²²¹ In an Augustinian sense, Brock sees this as a problematic of the heart being ‘claimed and reshaped by genuine difference.’²²² Key to this tension is the extent to which definitions of disability are multifarious—evolving and complex—shaped by differing social, medical, legal, cultural, and philosophical frameworks. As such, there is no single, universally accepted definition of disability. Rather, how disability is understood depends on the particular context and the lens through which it is viewed. However, Brock highlights the influential work of Rosmarie Garland-Thomson, a leading voice in disability studies, who offers a substantive definition that captures the nuance and context of contemporary uses of the label ‘disability’. She surmises:

Disability is an overarching and in some ways artificial category that encompasses congenital and acquired physical differences, mental illness and retardation, chronic and acute illnesses, fatal and progressive diseases, temporary and permanent injuries, and a wide range of bodily characteristics considered disfiguring, such as scars, birthmarks, unusual proportions, or obesity. Even though the prototypical disabled person posited in cultural representations never leaves a wheelchair, is totally blind, or profoundly deaf, most of the approximately forty million Americans with disabilities have a much more ambiguous relationship to the label. The physical impairments that render someone “disabled” are almost never absolute or static; they are dynamic, contingent conditions affected by many external factors and usually fluctuating over time.²²³

Garland-Thomson goes on to state that:

Disability, then, can be painful, comfortable, familiar, alienating, bonding, isolating, disturbing, endearing, challenging, infuriating, or ordinary. Embedded in the complexity of actual human relations, it is always more than the disabled figure can signify. That anyone can become disabled at any time makes disability more fluid, and perhaps more threatening, to those who identify themselves as normates than such seemingly more stable marginal identities as femaleness, blackness, or nondominant ethnic identities.²²⁴

²²⁰ Frances Mackenney-Jeffs, *Reconceptualising Disability for the Contemporary Church* (London: SCM Press, 2021), 134.

²²¹ Brock, *Wondrously Wounded*, 1.

²²² Brock, *Wondrously Wounded*, 1.

²²³ Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability In American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 13.

²²⁴ Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 14.

The concept of ‘normates’ is significant in Garland-Thomson’s work. She introduces the term to describe the culturally privileged subject-position defined in contrast to maligned and marginalised bodies.

The *normate* figure represents those who, by embodying socially acceptable traits, can claim cultural authority and consider themselves representative of the preferred and ‘definitive’ human being. However, whilst their identity may appear normative, it is, in fact, narrowly constructed and unrepresentative of wider society. As Garland-Thomson contends, the term *normate* can thus be deployed to expose ‘the constructed identity of those who, by way of the bodily configurations and cultural capital they assume, can step into a position of authority and wield the power it grants them’.²²⁵ Drawing on Erving Goffman, she highlights the degree to which the normate ideal—typically centred on whiteness, youthful vitality, maleness, heterosexuality, and physical normalcy—exerts coercive power by compelling individuals to conform to a constructed ideal or be considered socially discordant. By naming and interrogating the normate position, Garland-Thomson seeks to move beyond binary understandings of human identity and reveal the interdependent nature of social categories shaped by bodily differences.

Application of this concept to church growth interests thus focuses our attention on what we might frame as an ‘ecclesial normate’. Initiatives such as the Church of England’s *Renewal and Reform* (RR) programme make many of the same normative assumptions about what constitutes the ideal (normate) church—the viable, fit, and healthy body that performs and grows—while inadvertently marginalising parish churches that fail to align with this vision. Such initiatives, though often framed in the language of ‘renewal’, risk reinforcing a vision of a church that privileges productivity, visibility, and conformity over mutual dependence, care, and embodied difference. This structural indifference reveals how

²²⁵ Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 8.

institutional agendas of vitality can thus obscure the lived realities of those rendered peripheral by programmes of growth. In this way, particular human bodies and ecclesial bodies align in their experience of being marginalised.

As Luke Bretherton highlights, from an ethical perspective, the voices of the marginalised frequently go unheard, not through their silence, but through the socio-political arrangements of everyday life that obscure their cries for justice. Those who are materially or politically advantaged—often unintentionally—inhabit social worlds that reinforce their sense of entitlement and legitimacy, shielding them from the struggle of others. Accordingly, social mechanisms such as segregated living conditions, unequal educational opportunities, and systemic disparities in healthcare cultivate enclaves of indifference among the privileged. This indifference is not a neutral position; rather, it constitutes a form of moral deformation. For Bretherton, such a posture not only perpetuates injustice but also corrodes the ethical faculties of those benefiting from the status quo. He asserts that ‘when we remain unaware of how certain kinds of bodies are favoured by the systems we inhabit, we leave in place systemic disadvantages.’²²⁶ Instead of eliciting repentance when confronted with complicity, the privileged often respond with what he calls ‘aggrieved entitlement’, a defensive reaction that reinforces their insularity and moral self-righteousness. Bretherton thus calls for a reorientation of attention and solidarity to disrupt the normate position, opening space for genuine accountability. This call to solidarity invites the church to reflect on how visions of growth might be being shaped by unexamined cultural norms that prioritise the logic of productivity, efficiency, and normalisation. While the desire for numerical growth should be welcomed, it becomes theologically problematic when closely aligned with normate assumptions that marginalise churches failing to conform to ideals of market viability. In this context, church growth

²²⁶ Luke Bretherton, *A Primer in Christian Ethics: Christ and the Struggle to Live Well* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 92.

risks becoming a measure of cultural conformity rather than a witness to the radical welcome of the Gospel.

The questions raised by a normate hermeneutic reveal how church growth strategies may inadvertently replicate societal hierarchies of value, thereby excluding disabled, elderly, or otherwise non-normative members of the body of Christ. This analysis invites a reimagining of ecclesial flourishing—one that resists the urge to ‘fix’ or optimise and instead centres on interdependence, presence, and the theological significance of *every* body. To deepen this critique, it is necessary to consider how underlying models of disability—and by extension, models of the church—shape and reflect normate assumptions about bodies, agency, and belonging.

Models of disability

As discussed earlier in Chapter One (1.3) in relation to models of the church, within modern frameworks of strategy and control, models function as tools for capturing complex ideas through processes of reduction or scaling. While this can be analytically useful, modelling inevitably involves the loss of detail. Decisions must be made about what to include, emphasise, or omit in order to compress or standardise the original phenomenon. For this reason, models can only ever operate as approximations—transpositions of the social, philosophical, and theological commitments that shape how bodies, agency, and value are understood. They do not simply describe reality but interpret it through particular assumptions. Consequently, models are always vulnerable to normate bias and to ongoing contestation. As we have seen, this is especially evident in ecclesiological models of the church. Yet, as Jerome Bickenbach observes, the same dynamic is particularly pronounced within disability studies, where models remain a dominant analytical framework. As he writes:

Disability scholars could hardly be unaware of the debate about ‘models of disability’ as this discussion has been so entrenched as to be almost emblematic of the discourse. Scholars of women’s studies debate the conceptualisations of gender, to be sure, but not so much the existence of biological differences of sex. Disability studies is different because the conceptual debate has included the issue of whether it is legitimate even to posit a biological, medical or health dimension or aspect of disability. Whether early adherents of the British version of the ‘social model’ actually rejected the relevance of the biological phenomena of impairments in the conceptualisation of disability is open to debate. But the fact remains that disability studies has both multidisciplinary academic and political activist roots, and the interaction between the two has been most evident in the debate about models.²²⁷

Disability theology takes up this same cause, most notably through liberatory epistemologies that articulate a distancing from the medical model by reframing bodily difference and identity within divergent social, cultural, and Gospel terms. The development of this theological position is grounded in the evolution of disability models since the early 1980s, incorporating both social and rights-based models that reject the cultural dominance of medical epistemologies. To grasp the theological implications of these liberatory shifts, it is necessary to review the models that shape and inform both scholarly discourse and ecclesial imagination, thereby opening up a review of the ecclesiological implications. We begin with the medical model under scrutiny, due to its problematic nature within the contemporary social imaginary of Western culture and the church.

The *medical* model conceptualises disability as an inherent defect or abnormality within the individual body. Grounded in a pathology-oriented epistemology and rooted in Enlightenment rationalism and positivist biomedical science, it presumes an ontological and epistemological normativity to the ‘able’ body, categorising deviation from this norm as pathology. Disability, in this frame, becomes a deficit, and thus, the body is an object of surveillance, diagnosis, and therapeutic intervention. Furthermore, the medical model is bound within a Cartesian dualism (as noted in Chapter Two), whereby the body is viewed as mechanistic, separable from the ‘computer-model’ of the mind, as an organic structure

²²⁷ Jerome E. Bickenbach, “The ICF and its Relationship to Disability Studies,” in *Routledge Handbook of Disability Studies*, ed. Nick Watson and Simo Vehmas (Abingdon; New York: Routledge, 2020), 56.

that can be objectively categorised, measured, and corrected.²²⁸ The disabled body, therefore, is rendered passive, acted upon by experts who possess professional and legitimised knowledge. Theologically, this model often informs problematic soteriologies and eschatologies in which healing and bodily perfection become metaphors for spiritual wholeness. It risks perpetuating an ableist theology, wherein the disabled body is construed as either a site of divine punishment or a symbol of suffering to be transcended. Within some traditions, it reinforces a redemptive narrative that casts the disabled person either as a subject for healing or an instrument of moral inspiration. In both cases, the body's value is contingent upon its movement towards normalisation or its utility in others' spiritual development.

In contrast to the medical model, the *social* model (or minority group model) emerged from the disability rights movement of the late twentieth century, representing a paradigmatic shift in locus from the disabled body to disabling societal structures. Through a social lens, disability is understood not as a personal tragedy but as a form of oppression—the product of environmental, attitudinal, and institutional barriers that exclude certain bodies from full participation in civic and cultural life. Within disability studies, the social model resonates with Marxist critiques of power and structure, as well as Foucauldian accounts of biopolitics, in which social norms regulate which bodies are deemed productive, visible, and legitimate. The disabled body, in this account, becomes a site of resistance against a hegemonic body politic that privileges able-bodiedness as a normate ideal. Read theologically—and brought into critical judgment through a hermeneutic of disability—this model invites a prophetic critique of ecclesial power and a re-reading of biblical texts that assume healing as normative or salvific; yet such a reading also requires theological caution.

²²⁸ Taylor, "Overcoming Epistemology," 6.

Rather than locating power solely within abstract systems or discursive formations, a comparative theological approach attends to the ways in which such logics are embodied, sustained, and reproduced within the practices and habits of ecclesial life. In this sense, the social model's emphasis on structural exclusion finds theological traction within liberationist approaches that reframe the marginalised body—particularly the disabled body—not as a problem to be resolved but as an epistemic locus of theological insight. Through this lens, theological anthropology is reoriented toward the experiences of those at the margins, not as objects of inclusion but as participants whose presence discloses the conditions of communal life. Accordingly, the welcome of the other is not reducible to a host–guest dynamic, but concerns the recognition of each member as constitutive of the body itself.

Building on the social model, the *rights-based* model introduces juridical and ethical dimensions grounded in the principles of autonomy, dignity, and equality. It recognises the full legal and moral agency of those with disability as having the same rights and protections as other citizens. This model draws from both Kantian moral theory and liberal political philosophy, emphasising autonomy, consent, and the inviolability of persons. It affirms the moral worth of all bodies, regardless of physicality or cognition, and demands structural accommodations not as charity, but as a matter of rights. Disability is thus construed through the lens of justice, making the central question not what is wrong with the body, but what is wrong with a society that denies equitable access?

Through a theological lens, the rights-based model therefore challenges church doctrines and practices that infantilise or sustain a paternalism of disabled people. Reflecting this view, Jennie Weiss Block calls for a 'theology of access' that seeks the reformation of ecclesial ethics by emphasising justice as a divine imperative, re-situating the church as a communion of belonging for all, despite prevailing social norms.²²⁹ By critiquing

²²⁹ Jennie Weiss Block, *Copious Hosting: A Theology of Access for People with Disabilities* (New York: Continuum, 2002), 11.

the historical marginalisation of people with disabilities within church communities and calling for the active participation of disabled voices in theology, liturgy, and leadership, Block anticipates a just ecclesial polity to ensure that ‘people with disabilities take their rightful place within the Christian community.’²³⁰ In this way, the rights-based model asserts the body is not merely tolerated but empowered, framed within a mode of liberation that challenges the church to a renewed Christological vision of a community actively creating a place where all people can belong.

Whilst the social model and the rights-based model of disability inherently reject the dualistic instincts of the medical model, the theological root in both these models is inevitably reductionist and susceptible to positivist instincts. In contrast, Deborah Creamer proposes a model of limitation that offers a more radical reimagining of embodiment by deconstructing the binary between disabled and nondisabled bodies. Rather than viewing limitation as the unique burden of certain bodies (and not others), Creamer advances what she calls the ‘limits model’ of disability, which critiques the assumptions underpinning both the medical and social models.²³¹ She argues that all human beings experience limitations, and disability should not be regarded as exceptional but rather as a constitutive dimension of embodied existence. This perspective moves theology away from frameworks of cure or normalisation towards embracing both difference and interdependence. Creamer asserts that finitude, vulnerability, and dependency are inherent to all human existence as creatures of God’s good creation. In this model, disability is not an aberration, but a form of embodiment that reveals fundamental truths about the human condition and the wounded body of Christ.

²³⁰ Block, *Copious Hosting*, 11.

²³¹ Deborah Beth Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology: Embodied Limits and Constructive Possibilities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 31.

Drawing on the trend of process theology—framing God and the world as relational and ever-changing—Creamer emphasises the lived experience and situatedness of the body in time, space, and relationality. By rejecting universalising tendencies, limitation is, therefore, not a point of failure but constitutive of real life and living bodies. Resisting the optimisation narratives of late capitalism and biomedicine, the limits model proposes that human flourishing occurs not in the transcendence of limits, but through their reception. In this way, Creamer’s *limits model* aligns with incarnational theology, wherein God’s solidarity with human limitation is most fully expressed in the embodied life and suffering of Jesus Christ. This reframes ecclesiology within a Christology from below (beginning with a human Christ), rather than seeking to explain or overcome disability, theology must attend to what real disabled people reveal about God’s grace. In turn, this dismantles perfectionist eschatologies in favour of presence, vulnerability, and relationality. Here, the body is not a problem to be solved or a symbol to be interpreted, but a site of sacred encounter — irreducibly valuable not in spite of its limitations, but through them. This model also carries implications for sacramentality, ethics, and ecclesiology, calling communities not just to accommodate difference, but to reconfigure their understanding of what it means to be whole, human, and loved. Given the extensive influence of Creamer’s limits model within disability theology, special attention will be given to this in the following chapter.

Next, we will continue by exploring the impact of models within ecclesial contexts. It is instructive to note that just as disability theology employs multiple frameworks to illuminate the complexities of embodiment, ecclesiology similarly finds no single definition of the church but instead draws on a range of models to articulate its particular and divine identity as the body of Christ.

What difference does the label ‘disabled’ make?

Following the disability rights movement of the early 1980s, which laid the groundwork for disability studies as a distinct and contextual field within contemporary theological discourse, disability theology began to take formal shape in the late twentieth century, particularly during the mid-1990s. Although Christian theology has historically engaged with questions of suffering, embodiment, and human limitation, it was not until disabled theologians began articulating theological perspectives grounded in their own lived experience of disability that the field began to emerge with definable contours. This development marked a paradigmatic shift from viewing disability primarily through the lens of sin, healing, or charity to one in which disability is recognised as a site of theological reflection, insight, and fecundity in relation to modes of Christian hospitality and witness. Reflecting on the work of Kerry Wynn, who employs Garland-Thomson’s work on the *normate* position to assess the implications on the interpretation of Yahwistic narratives, Amos Yong extends this within theological accounts of disability to avoid ‘normate biases’ within ecclesial perspectives.²³² He contends that:

These assumptions function normatively so that the inferior status of people with disabilities is inscribed into our consciousness. Note, for example, how the rhetoric functions to describe people with impairments as *dis*-abled, *in*-capacitated, *in*-capable, *ab*-normal, and so on. In other words, non-disabled people take their experiences of the world as normal, thereby marginalising and excluding the experiences of people with disabilities as not normal. [...] In short, non-disabled people have a built-in *normate* bias against people with disabilities.²³³

In view of this bias, it is also worth noting who gets to voice disability in the first place. Yong asks: ‘What right do I have as a non-disabled man to write a book about theology and disability?’²³⁴ This question raises a deeper epistemological concern shared broadly within

²³² Amos Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church: A New Vision of the People of God* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2011), 10. See also Kerry H. Wynn, “The Normate Hermeneutic and Interpretations of Disability Within the Yahwistic Narratives,” in *This Abled Body: Rethinking Disabilities in Biblical Studies*, ed. Hector Avalos, Sarah J. Melcher, and Jeremy Schipper (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 91–92.

²³³ Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*, 10–11.

²³⁴ Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*, 10.

the field of disability theology—namely, the issue of authorship within theological discourse. Informed by his brother’s experience with Down syndrome, Yong advances a pneumatological framework that privileges interdependence and communal discernment, while remaining attentive to the dynamics of perspective and voice.

Mirroring many of the changes hard-fought for by disability studies and activism, this theological shift also involved changes in language and symbols brought about by those who do the describing. In particular, the publication of Nancy Eiesland’s ‘The Disabled God: *Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability*’ (1994) is widely acknowledged as a foundational moment in the development of disability theology. Writing from her own experience of disability, Eiesland challenges the ecclesial and doctrinal marginalisation of disabled people by proposing Jesus as having become ‘the disabled God’ through the retention of his bodily resurrected wounds.²³⁵ This reframing of the divine, Eiesland argues, disrupts the normativity that shapes much of contemporary theological anthropology and ecclesiology, and instead makes space for a liberatory reconfiguration grounded in the embodiment and real lives of people with disabilities. Eiesland’s articulation of the disabled God thus relocates theological authority from abstract doctrine to the lived realities of disabled persons. Asserting that theological knowledge must be grounded in embodied experience, she states:

As linguists and anthropologists know, the act of naming someone or something grants the namer power over the named. Historically, rather than naming ourselves, the disabled have been named by medical scientific professionals or by people who denied our full personhood. These professionals considered disabled persons to be less intelligent, less capable of making the “right” decisions, less “realistic,” less logical, and less self-directed than non-disabled persons. Thus “capable” persons and experts need to define the experience of disabled individuals.²³⁶

²³⁵ Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 100.

²³⁶ Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 25.

Eiesland's insistence that disabled people are not merely passive recipients but active sites of divine revelation inaugurates a relational epistemology that disrupts theological gatekeeping.

Influenced by Eiesland's seminal work, the field continued to expand throughout the 1990s and into the early 2000s, most notably through the work of theologians such as Stanley Hauerwas, Hans Reinders, John Swinton, Deborah Creamer, Brian Brock, and Amos Yong. In varying ways, each argues that the inclusion of disabled voices is, therefore, not optional but essential to the integrity of the church and its theological coherence. They propose a participatory model of theological construction, wherein people with disabilities are recognised as co-authors of doctrine, liturgy, and ecclesial identity. In particular, Hauerwas's work is wide-ranging in this field, interrogating the medical, moral, and ecclesial implications of vulnerability and dependence, insisting that communities of faith must be shaped by the presence and gifts of those with disability. Yet, tracing his earlier work on disability, we can easily see the extent to which the labels associated with impairment have been prone to cultural norms. As the use of the term 'retarded' in the following reflection from Hauerwas in the mid-1980s exemplifies: '[T]he challenge of learning to know, to be with, and care for the retarded is nothing less than learning to know, be with, and love God. God's face is the face of the retarded; God's body is the body of the retarded; God's being is that of the retarded.'²³⁷

The contestation over the language used to conceptualise disability reflects a growing recognition that categories and terms often fail to capture the realities of the human condition. Contemporary disability studies largely view disability as a social and cultural construct shaped by societal structures and norms, rather than as an inherent medical

²³⁷ Hauerwas, *Suffering Presence*, 178.

condition. Over the past forty years, the terminology surrounding disability has shifted considerably. As Simi Linton observes:

Across the world and throughout history various terminologies and meanings are ascribed to the types of human variations known in contemporary Westernized countries as disabilities. Over the past century the term *disabled* and others, such as *handicapped* and the less inclusive term *crippled*, have emerged as collective nouns that convey the idea that there is something that links this disparate group of people. The terms have been used to arrange people in ways that are socially and economically convenient to the society.²³⁸

The fluidity of such naming reveals how language not only construes but also constructs cultural perceptions of human value and difference. As Linton highlights, the naming of disability has historically functioned to categorise and manage bodies, reinforcing systems of exclusion and control. These linguistic constructions are never neutral; they embed assumptions about capacity, normalcy, and worth that inevitably extend into theological discourse. This recognition strengthens the imperative within disability theology to interrogate inherited doctrinal formulations and the images of God they sustain. It is in this context that Eiesland's work is pivotal. Rather than accepting the marginalising effects of dominant theological language, she reclaims and reconfigures central Christian symbols to reflect the lived experience of disability, marking a decisive turn toward an embodied and liberatory theological epistemology.

Liberating disability

Eiesland's depiction of the disabled God—the resurrected Christ who retains impairment—is theologically subversive and profoundly liberative. This image disrupts traditional notions of divine perfection and instead affirms that the resurrected body is not healed or normalised but marked by the same wounds that locate God in solidarity with the disabled. In this Christological interpretation, Eiesland extends the liberationist tradition by asserting that

²³⁸ Simi Linton, *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 9–10.

God is not just *among* the marginalised but is *one* of them. This theological reconfiguration is shared amongst disability theologians. Most notably, Amos Yong, whose brother, Mark, has Down syndrome, provides a personal and theological point of departure for much the same argument: that the disabled body reveals something about God that normative frameworks cannot access. Brian Brock furthers this trajectory by critiquing technocratic and perfectionist ideologies, calling instead for a theological anthropology that embraces fragility as central to human identity and divine grace. In exposition of the book of Genesis and referencing Creamer's limits model, Brock writes:

God loves and cares for embodied beings. This love is expressed in the creation accounts by the carefulness of God in giving bodies the defined boundedness they need to be discrete entities. In the creation accounts, to not be formless but to have embodied limits is a marvelous gift. Each created thing is given its own form and discreteness to keep it from dissipating into mixed-upness and even total dispersal.²³⁹

Brock continues, contending that a scriptural rather than positivist (managerial) account of human nature is characterised by limits, which are inherently good as part of God's creation. Accordingly, disability is not a human deficit to be remedied but is a theologically generative category that reconfigures prevailing anthropological assumptions concerning human identity as anything less than the *imago Dei*. As Brock highlights, the Genesis creation narratives, particularly in their affirmation of corporeal boundedness as a divine gift, thus disclose a vision of the human person not as an isolated, autonomous agent but as fundamentally interdependent, constituted through relationality, sustained by mutual vulnerability, and oriented towards communal flourishing.

Through a Christological revaluation of the Levitical code (precluding defect and blemish), Yong further highlights for us the extent to which the unblemished character of Jesus becomes problematic in contemporary society, particularly given its tendency to

²³⁹ Brock Brian, *Disability: Living into the Diversity of Christ's Body* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021), 66.

‘perpetuate the stigmas engendered by ableist biases.’²⁴⁰ Instead, Yong advances a performative theological method that he describes as a ‘pneumatological imagination’, explicating an eschatological vision by which disability becomes constitutive of theological knowledge and liberative human activity.²⁴¹ Further to this, he insists that impaired bodies stand as a symbol of resistance against both societal and ecclesial imaginaries that tend to devalue disabled lives. Specifically, he asserts that through his crucifixion, Jesus, as the sinless Great High Priest (in reference to the Levitical code), ‘fulfills his priestly functions with an impaired and disabled body.’²⁴²

Yong develops a theology that is both biblically rooted and experientially informed, challenging standard readings of healing narratives—such as the many healed at Peter’s house (Matt 8.14-17) or the healing of the paralytic (Mark 2.1-12)—not as endorsement of able-bodied normativity (the restoration of perfection), but as moments where God’s works are revealed in human limitation, notably exemplified in the Gospel of John: ‘Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.’²⁴³ Yong argues that healing is therefore not centred on restoring ‘normalcy’ (as would be with a cure), but reconfigured in relational terms such that divine action is manifest precisely in ‘reconciling lives who were formerly strangers to one another.’²⁴⁴ Yong further asserts that,

[...] the Gospel accounts are less about the curing of bodies than they are about the saving power and authority of Christ and his name. The saving work of God can occur even if the curing of bodies doesn’t happen, and we would do well to assure people with disabilities that cures are not the norm by which to measure the reality of divine salvation.²⁴⁵

²⁴⁰ Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*, 28.

²⁴¹ Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome*, 13–14.

²⁴² Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*, 29.

²⁴³ John 9.3

²⁴⁴ Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome*, 274.

²⁴⁵ Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*, 66.

Furthermore, Yong's pneumatology presents a radically inclusive ecclesiology, asserting that cognitive or physical limitations do not restrict the movement and gifting of the Holy Spirit. Drawing on Saint Luke's account of the day of Pentecost in the book of Acts, Yong emphasises that the Spirit is poured out on 'all flesh' (Acts 2.17), a phrase that includes—not despite but because of their difference—the cognitively disabled, the physically impaired, and the socially stigmatised. This theological anthropology challenges the church to reimagine inclusion not as mere accommodation, but as a structural transformation rooted in the conviction that *every* body holds the capacity for the *imago Dei* through an interrelationality with others and an embodied interdependence with the world.²⁴⁶ Through differing perspectives, Brock, Yong, and Eiesland all integrate a theology of liberation by centring the voices and experiences of those with disability, which in turn calls the church to renounce paternalistic tendencies, urging a transformation in both theological imagination and ecclesial practice. As Eiesland notably contends:

The disabled God does not engage in a battle for dominance or create a new normative power, God is in the present social-symbolic order at the margins with people with disabilities and instigates transformation from this de-centered position. The disabled God repudiates the conception of disability as a consequence of individual sin. Injustice against persons with disabilities is surely sin; our bodies, however, are not artefacts of sin, original or otherwise.²⁴⁷

For Eiesland, liberation begins when the church interrogates these 'social-symbolic' frameworks and recognises disabled lives as sites of divine revelation and theological integrity. A theology of liberation thus functions both as a critical lens and a constructive tool, reimagining the church as the body of Christ through the lived experiences of those labelled 'disabled'. Disability, in this view, is not a problem to be solved but a locus of theological insight and ecclesial renewal. By emphasising the social-symbolic lives of disabled people, Eiesland challenges the church not merely to include but to be reshaped by those it has historically marginalised. This resonates well with Nelson's body theology,

²⁴⁶ Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome*, 173–74.

²⁴⁷ Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 100.

which critiques dualistic, disembodied theologies that assign symbolic meanings with social consequences for bodily difference. He writes:

Through language, symbols, and gestures we attach meanings to everyday acts and things. We do not respond to the things themselves so much as to the symbolic meanings they have for us. And these meanings are always social, arising and being modified and changed through social interaction.²⁴⁸

Building on Nelson and Eiesland, Yong extends this analysis into doctrinal and hermeneutical territory, insisting that the lived realities of disability must reorient theological imagination. He argues that the disabled body should be a doctrinal and hermeneutical imperative for the church. At the same time, he cautions that ‘there is a problem that what we call disability today is anachronistic when applied to the Bible since there is no straightforward biblical notion that captures what the term disability has come to mean presently.’²⁴⁹ Accordingly, he urges the church to reread scripture with and through the experiences of those with disabilities, rather than framing theology and ecclesial praxis through normative biases.²⁵⁰

Yong contends that disability is not marginal but central to the biblical narrative of salvation and healing. Divine solidarity, he asserts, occurs within disability, not merely in overcoming it. From this perspective, an ecclesiology attentive to disabled embodiment does not simply incorporate difference; it begins *from* difference as its hermeneutical ground. In this way, the disabled body is not ancillary to ecclesiological construction but foundational to a reimagined vision of the church—one that is capacious enough to embrace difference as a theological resource and to affirm disability not as a deficit to be overcome, but as a locus of ecclesial and doctrinal renewal.

²⁴⁸ Nelson, *Body Theology*, 46.

²⁴⁹ Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*, 6.

²⁵⁰ Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*, 9–11.

Summary

From what we have seen thus far, the intersection between models of disability and those of the church (highlighted in Chapter 2.1) begins to reveal the connections and possibilities of how disability theology not only reconfigures doctrinal understandings of embodiment but also interrogates the ecclesial frameworks through which the church envisions its mission, structure, and growth. At the heart of this critique lies a fundamental challenge to the Church of England's *Renewal and Reform* programme, which, despite its stated aim to revitalise the church's presence and sustainability, often measures ecclesial health through managerial metrics, such as attendance figures, financial viability, and numerical growth. Such criteria reveal a normative ecclesiology that privileges efficiency, expansion, and quantifiable success over fragility, difference and the realities of interdependence.

Framing growth in terms of 'viability', the RR programme implicitly marginalises smaller, resource-poor, or demographically 'unsuccessful' parishes, many of which are precisely those where the presence and witness of disabled persons might be most profound. Moreover, the corollary of the RR programme's emphasis on optimisation echoes the logic of the medical model of disability, wherein impairment is framed as a problem to be solved—mirrored in ecclesial terms by a church that must be fixed, streamlined, or made more appealing to normative expectations. In contrast, theologies of disability, particularly as developed by Eiesland, Yong, and Brock, call for a deeper transformation: one that reimagines the church not as a perfectible institution but as a community marked by mutual vulnerability, shared limitation, and embodied grace. As such, this section has argued that the disabled body, far from being a deficit or anomaly, is a theological locus that disrupts dominant models of ecclesial identity and opens new horizons for understanding the body of Christ. By refusing the binaries of health-sickness, whole-broken, or success-failure, disability theology invites the church to resist idealised blueprints of growth and instead cultivate a practical-prophetic ecclesiology, as Nicholas Healy proposes—an ecclesiology

grounded in historical contingency, relational discernment, and eschatological hope. It is through this lens that the church can begin to see not just disabled persons within its midst, but to recognise itself as a disabled body: dependent, limited, and yet deeply capable of bearing divine witness through precisely those marks the world deems disqualifying.

By tracing the contours of a theological and ecclesiological reimagining, this section has also demonstrated that disability is not ancillary to the church's identity but constitutive of its very form and vocation. Attending to the epistemic authority of disabled persons, interrogating normative constructions of embodiment, and resisting ecclesial frameworks that equate growth with vitality or numerical expansion with theological legitimacy, the church is called to a more faithful enactment of its life and mission. A church that embraces the witness of disabled bodies gestures towards a liberatory ecclesiology rooted in mutual vulnerability, relational interdependence, and a theology of grace that emerges *from* rather than *despite* bodily difference. Such a vision, while appearing paradoxical within dominant paradigms of ecclesial health, begins to unmask the extent to which ideals of perfection—whether of bodies or ecclesial form—are not merely illusory but theologically distorting. As the following section will explore, these ideals are often bound to aesthetic constructions of the body, which, far from being benign, function as mechanisms of exclusion, rendering invisible the redemptive and revelatory potential embedded in corporeal limitations and woundedness.

The Paradox of Disability: *Perfect Bodies and a Perfect church*

“I regard myself as a cyclist, not a deaf person who happens to cycle”

Francesca Baroni²⁵¹

Introduction

When reflecting on the Apostle Paul’s articulation of the church as the body of Christ (cf. 1 Cor 12.12-27), a central question soon emerges: when we think of a body, what sort of body are we thinking of? This section explores this question within the context of the Church of England’s *Renewal and Reform* (RR) programme. While the metaphor of the body is a powerful theological construct, the RR programme engages it more implicitly than explicitly. Within its literature, there is little direct ecclesiological reflection on what constitutes growth or what might be driving the church’s numerical decline, aside from occasional references to the effects of secular pressures and market forces.²⁵² Consequently, the metaphorical image that emerges through this discourse is of a body that has become sluggish and in need of a fitness regime, suggesting that the church needs to ‘hit the gym’. This raises a further question about what sort of body is considered ideal.

This language and imagery invite a critical reflection on the nature of ecclesial ‘fitness’, especially when considered through the lens of cultural ideals surrounding the body. The modern obsession with vitality codified by concepts such as the ‘beach-ready body’—toned, flawless, and always improving—mirrors the ecclesial desire for a ‘perfect’ church: growing, streamlined, and visibly successful. Yet both ideals are ultimately unrealistic, shaped more by external gazes and cultural pressures than by inner health or authenticity. Theologically,

²⁵¹ Herbie Sykes, “Francesca Baroni: Senses Working Overtime,” *Rouleur*, 135 2025, 99.

²⁵² Voas and Watt, *Numerical Change in Church Attendance*, 26.

this raises the question: whose gaze is currently shaping the church's sense of its own body? This gaze—internalised and performative—is silent (remaining implicit) yet holds the capacity to restrict a vision of health, whereby numbers unintentionally become coterminous with the flourishing church (despite any claims to the contrary).

Given that growth within the RR programme is predominantly framed in statistical terms, this implies that, provided the right metrics are met, a linear trajectory can be mapped from decline to recovery. Yet there is no clear case made for what growth means beyond the data.²⁵³ The implicit (and positivist) message is that numerical growth is, therefore, the only reasonable and faithful response of the church in witness to God's grace. Yet this raises a further question: if the church, as the body of Christ, fails to match this normate ecclesiology, what assurance must it seek for relevance and participation in divine action? To move beyond this reductive logic of metrics and ideals, alternative ways of discerning the church's theological identity become necessary. By paying attention to the subtle, often unspoken dimensions of standards of success replete within institutional discourse and language, attention can be given to the tacit, performative, and culturally embedded aspects of church practice that speak volumes, even in their silence.

This is where Martyn Percy's attention to *implicit theology* becomes illuminating, attending to the performative rather than procedural (or propositional) aspects of ecclesiology. Through this approach, we begin to see how style, not just substance, holds theological significance. This is particularly important in a context where growth language dominates the missional discourse yet rarely engages the complexities of church life. As Percy highlights, the Anglican tradition often forms its ecclesiology not through formal declarations, but through patterns of practice and performance. He contends that by 'adopting the notion of implicit theology as a lens through which to consider the more

²⁵³ Bev Botting, *Statistics for Mission: 2016*, Church of England (London: CofE Research and Statistics, 2017), 18.

performative aspects of ecclesiology, we are able to privilege style, not just substance, as theologically significant.²⁵⁴ By examining habitual practices—language, culture, worship—alongside institutional structures and polity, a more textured and nuanced picture of the Church of England’s theological posture towards growth begins to emerge. As such, Percy invites us to see that ‘not everything that shapes the church can be or is plainly expressed.’²⁵⁵ Yet he cautions that fascination with numerical growth is leading the church towards a form of idolatry, as he contends:

[N]umerical growth—of almost any kind—has become something of an idol within many ecclesial cultures, it has become almost impossible for churches to resist the temptations of literature, training programs and motivational resources that are designed to increase the power, mass and performance of the body—even the body of Christ.²⁵⁶

This fascination also opens up space to critique the gaze that constructs unrealistic ideals—whether of bodies or churches—and to consider how faithfulness might be imagined beyond the realm of perfection (or growth). To begin, we will examine the cultural impulse towards perfect bodies and consider how the gaze shapes not only what is seen as desirable or ideal but also what is rendered invisible or diminished, in both the human and ecclesial body.

Gazing in wonder

During an interview with *Rouleur*, a cycling magazine, the young cyclist Francesca Baroni subverts her interviewer with the disruptive statement cited above at the opening of this section (see fig. 2). Presumed exceptional, given her deafness yet strong athletic performance, her words reject the logic imposed by the medicalised gaze, instead highlighting what she loves, thereby resisting the culturally assumed deficit. Baroni is not in denial of her deafness, but she refuses to let it overshadow the complexity of her lived

²⁵⁴ Percy, *Shaping the Church*, 4.

²⁵⁵ Percy, *Shaping the Church*, 2.

²⁵⁶ Percy, *The Ecclesial Canopy*, 19.

experience. This mode of resistance invites a broader interrogation of how the gaze structures which bodies are seen, and how they are interpreted, disciplined, or celebrated within normative frameworks.



Figure 2. Francesca Baroni competing at the *Exact Cross Beringen*, Belgium. (Photograph by David Andrés Zels, 12 October, 2024), Photo courtesy of David Andres Photography.

Judith Butler's theorisation of the *gaze* in *Bodies That Matter* elucidates this regulatory function of visibility in the constitution of subjects. The gaze, for Butler, is not merely observational but performative—it enacts and enforces intelligibility through repetition and normativity. Disabled bodies, under this regime, are frequently rendered hyper-visible and overdetermined by narratives of lack or, conversely, a performative exceptionality, as is the case with Baroni. This control of the gaze is exemplified most distinctly through the Western aesthetic ideal of the 'beach-ready body'. Operating as a potent symbol within contemporary visual and consumer cultures, it encodes normative aesthetic ideals of the body that ultimately become deeply exclusionary to the majority. In this way, the beach body aesthetic functions as a normate ideal.

At its core, the 'beach-ready body' presupposes a normative, able-bodied subject—typically lean, toned, and unmarked by blemish—as the standard of cultural desirability. This is the normate body. This ideal functions to delineate the boundaries of bodily

acceptability, rendering some bodies as deviant or unwelcome within the sightlines of leisure spaces, such as the beach, where exposure and visibility are heightened. Whilst controversial advertising such as the 2015 *Protein World* campaign: ‘Are You Beach Body Ready?’ (see fig. 3) was eventually banned by the UK Advertising Standards Authority—on the technicality of misleading health claims, rather than on the basis of harm, offence or lack of social responsibility—the normate perspective of a ‘perfect body’ remains pervasive in society.

When examined through the lens of disability, this construct is soon revealed not merely as a superficial (and sexist) marketing trope but as a mechanism that upholds ableist hierarchies of corporeal value and aesthetic, not least because all bodies on a beach are, in one way or another, ‘ready’.



Figure 3. The controversial ‘Protein World’ advert, *Are You Beach Body Ready?* displayed in an underground station, London. (Photograph by Catherine Wylie/PA, June 27, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/jun/27/beach-body-ready-america-weight-loss-ad-instagram#img-1>)

In *The Birth of the Clinic*, Michel Foucault articulates the medical gaze as a mode of seeing that is not merely passive observation but deeply disciplinary—a clinical power that renders the human body intelligible only through a medical model. Accordingly, the medical gaze is a mechanism of both epistemic production and social control. He describes

the transformation of medicine from a discipline confined to pathological spaces, such as hospitals, into a technology of visibility operating across the social field. This transformation is not only scientific but political, as it requires the removal of institutional and conceptual barriers that obstruct a totalising, unimpeded gaze. Such a gaze, ostensibly in pursuit of truth and health, aligned with the revolutionary ideal of a transparent, rational social order, wherein all elements were visible, interchangeable, and subject to systematic observation. Foucault draws a parallel between the clinical field and the revolutionary vision of society: both are structured by an ideal geometry of openness and legibility, enabling the extraction of knowledge through constant surveillance. However, this visibility is not neutral. Much like Jeremy Bentham's *panopticon* prison, where the threat of being watched or seen causes individuals to self-regulate (behave), Foucault emphasises that 'the gaze is not faithful to truth, nor subject to it, without asserting, at the same time, a supreme mastery: the gaze that sees is a gaze that dominates'.²⁵⁷ The gaze constructs and orders the field it surveys, producing subjects as objects of knowledge and intervention.

While framed in the emancipatory language of Enlightenment and Revolution—truth, liberty, and light—this new regime of visibility marks a shift from sovereign to disciplinary power. The freedom of truth, Foucault suggests, conceals a new form of domination, wherein knowledge does not merely reflect reality but organises it through the silent violence of observation. Thus, the medical gaze becomes emblematic of a broader modern logic in which surveillance, normalisation, and power are exercised not through overt coercion, but through the very structures that claim to liberate. The convergence of this with Hopewell's mechanistic model of the church is salient. Within this diagnostic framework of the gaze, disability is construed less as a lived experience and more as an epistemic anomaly, mapped onto a grid of clinical (mechanised) intelligibility, transforming the disabled body into a

²⁵⁷ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*, trans. A. M. Sheridan (London: Routledge, 2003), 45.

tableau of signs, separating pathology from personhood, undermining the relational and narrative dimensions of embodied life.

In *Wondrously Wounded: Theology, Disability, and the Body of Christ*, Brian Brock offers a theological reframing of this type of public gaze, highlighting its entanglement with disability, routine invisibility, and ecclesial life. Brock's account resists both sentimental inclusion and clinical abstraction, instead tracing the phenomenological and theological weight of what it means to be *seen*—to be rendered a legible body—within spaces structured by ableist norms and contested narratives of value. Reflecting on the realities of public life with his disabled son, Adam, Brock writes:

I write in response first to averted gazes, confused and repulsed gazes, mocking and annoyed gazes, and more powerfully by gazes and gestures of joy and delight. [...] Perhaps more powerfully than anything else, the gaze and the gesture produce the feeling of threat in modern societies within which those bearing the label “disabled” must live their lives.²⁵⁸

Given the threat of scrutiny that our modern surveillance society poses, Brock further notes:

[I]t is notoriously difficult to read gazes, a problem further complicated by the ambiguity and essentially contested nature of disability ascriptions. [...] The realization that something has changed comes in moments of noticing oneself internally bracing to weather the field of gazes that crisscross public space or assuming a defensive crouch at curious stares.²⁵⁹

This need for a ‘defensive crouch’ due to the gaze attests to the moment in which disabled persons become both hyper-visible as objects of scrutiny while also remaining ontologically opaque, as their personhood is called into question through modern healthcare systems.²⁶⁰ In this regard, Brock echoes, albeit theologically, Judith Butler's analysis of the gaze as constitutive of subject formation.

Butler argues that subjectivity is always formed through relational structures of recognition—structures that are inherently asymmetrical, often violent, and unequally distributed across bodies. The gaze, in Butler's terms, does not merely see; it constitutes,

²⁵⁸ Brock, *Wondrously Wounded*, 5.

²⁵⁹ Brock, *Wondrously Wounded*, 6.

²⁶⁰ Brock, *Wondrously Wounded*, 132–33.

disciplines, and sometimes erases. It names the body as intelligible or illegible within normative social grammars. Brock's theological reimagining of this economy of vision does not deny this violence but instead reorients its telos. Rather than accepting the disciplining gaze of the clinic or the condescending glance of ecclesial charity, Brock calls for the formation of a redeemed gaze—a way of seeing grounded in mutuality, vulnerability, and sacramental recognition. In contrast to Foucault's medical gaze, which isolates and objectifies through epistemic control, and in critical engagement with Butler's account of the gaze as a mechanism of discursive power, Brock invites us into a Eucharistic ethic of vision: a mode of seeing that beholds the disabled body not as deficit but as an encounter with the presence of Christ in the 'lives of people labeled disabled'.²⁶¹

For Brock, this Eucharistic vision is not another modality of the church, or what Nicholas Healy calls the ideal-type—bearing little relation to its lived, historical form—but is situated within the concrete realities of a localised community of faith. As such, the church's call is not simply to *imagine* differently but to *practice* differently—to form its gaze through repeated acts of relational encounter, liturgical habitus, and shared vulnerability. Here, the convergence of Brock, Butler, and Healy yields a fruitful ecclesiological imperative: that the church must learn to look with a renewed sight, not as sovereign observer but as vulnerable body, constituted in and through encounters with the other.

Butler's notion of precarity—the differential exposure to injury and misrecognition—finds theological resonance in Brock's insistence that disabled lives reveal the fragility of all human life, and thereby reconfigure what constitutes strength, visibility, and personhood within the church. The gaze, then, becomes a site of either ecclesial deformation or the hope of renewal. However, to be different is to stand out and attract attention. To be a member of a minority group is to be a statistical outlier and therefore to attract a certain

²⁶¹ Brock, *Wondrously Wounded*, 137.

curious gaze that may be a normal human reflex, innocent and involuntary, consigning personhood to the approving (or disapproving glance) of the other. Yet Brock notes the irony that, despite being a curiosity, being an outlier consigns those with differences to becoming invisible within social and political spheres. Hence, to cultivate a non-controlling, Christologically informed gaze is to participate in a community that understands itself not as an enclave of perfect bodies but as the cruciform body of Christ—broken, gathered, and glorified in its shared need for grace. Disability, in this vision, is not a limit to ecclesial communion but one of its most urgent and generative sites.

Returning to the cultural ideal of the ‘beach-ready body’ thus reveals the paradigmatic articulation of the contemporary disciplinary gaze—a norm that both reflects and reinforces regimes of visibility rooted in consumer capitalism, biomedical normativity, and aesthetic conformity. Marketed through fitness culture, the beauty industry, and media ideals, the beach-ready body is a performative construct that demands a visible demonstration of control, effort, and moral virtue through sculpted form, leanness, and symmetry of the body. This body is not merely desired; it is coercively idealised, policed through shame, surveillance, and aspirational fantasy. Here, the gaze becomes an internalised panoptic force—a disciplining sensorium—one that Butler describes as the ‘ritualised production’ of embodiment through the performativity and repetition of norms guided by the cultural force of taboo and prohibition.²⁶² In this sense, the beach-ready body exemplifies the Foucauldian shift from sovereign power to biopolitical management, where power is exercised through norms of health, desirability, and visibility that regulate life itself.

Within the context of the Church of England, this disciplining gaze is not only cultural but institutional. It is increasingly mediated through diocesan strategies, national programmes, and consultative frameworks that seek to render the local church visible,

²⁶² Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 60.

measurable, and therefore governable. Often produced within diocesan offices at a distance from the lived realities of parish ministry, or through commissioned reports by research organisations such as *Eido Research* (as discussed in Chapter 1.3), these strategic mappings function as a form of ecclesial oversight that mirrors the dynamics of the clinical gaze: they abstract, categorise, and evaluate according to pre-determined growth strategies. In doing so, they risk displacing theological discernment with market-derived metrics, shaping the church's understanding of its own body not through the practices of worship, care, and mutual recognition, but through externally imposed criteria of viability, optimisation, and success.

From a theological perspective, such ideals are not merely aesthetic modalities; they function as false eschatologies, projecting an imagined perfection onto the present that excludes bodies marked by fragility, weight, disability, age, or normative difference. In this sense, the beach-ready body represents the unblemished resurrected Christ—a sanitised and glamourised resurrection absent of any wounds, weakness, or relational dependence. In this way, the perfect body performs a pseudo-secularised soteriology in which salvation is reimagined as bodily optimisation and grace is replaced by grit, gym routines, and cosmetic purity. Brock directly subverts this logic. By confronting the unspoken assumption that disabled bodies lack the aesthetic and moral coherence to participate fully in public life, he challenges the presumption that such bodies must justify themselves by achieving proximity to normative appearance or capacity. As he writes, 'Adam has come to live in me'—a statement that resists both pity and idealisation, instead describing a relational reconstitution of identity through embodied communion.²⁶³ Where the beach-ready body demands conformity through visual perfection, Brock's theological anthropology insists that the body's meaning is not given by aesthetic trend but by its embeddedness in the relational

²⁶³ Brock, *Wondrously Wounded*, 6.

matrix of divine and human love. This insight intersects with Healy's critique of idealised ecclesial models noted in the previous section, cautioning against the church mimicking the logic of the perfected body: coherent, seamless, and uncontested. The church, like the disabled body, is marked by fracture, dependence, and contingency, and to imagine either in perfected terms is to deny the cruciform character of Christian life. Just as the beach-ready body displaces blemish and elevated BMI from its aesthetic horizon, so ideal ecclesiologies obscure the struggles of the local church to serve both parish and people faithfully without any expectation of return.

In this light, the beach-ready body and the normate church function as corollaries, each an icon of sanitised perfection that occludes the truth of human vulnerability and the redemptive power of weakness. Against this, a theology of the gaze, viewed through a hermeneutic of disability, reorients a vision towards the wounded, the unwelcome, the hidden. It invites the church to become a community that does not demand legibility according to aesthetic or cognitive norms, but one that beholds the scarred and non-normative body, the image of the risen Christ, whose glorified form retains the wounds of crucifixion.

This theological vision reframes embodiment not as a project of self-mastery but as a gift received in interdependence, and ecclesial life not as the perfection of the many into the one, but as the gathering of the broken into communion. To reject the beach-ready body as an eschatological ideal is to affirm that salvation is not found in the smooth surface of the self but in the pierced and risen body of Christ, who makes room for all bodies, especially those the world has rendered invisible.

Reaching and grasping

The assumption that the pursuit of growth—specifically church growth—is inherently good runs throughout the RR programme. A growing church is taken to be a healthy one, and within both organic and economic metaphors, healthy things are expected to grow. Yet this assumption gives rise to a particular posture—one of reaching and grasping—where growth is no longer received as gift but pursued as an end in itself. In such a posture, the church risks mistaking expansion for faithfulness, and numerical increase as vitality. When left unchecked, this logic distorts the telos of church life, tending towards accumulation and forms of domination that echo what, as noted in Chapter 1.3, Lesslie Newbigin describes as a ‘dangerous case of cancer’.²⁶⁴ A tension therefore emerges between what is desired and what is needed—the proverbial reach that exceeds its grasp. This impulse to reach and grasp thus reflects a deeper theological misalignment, in which managerialist logic displaces dependence upon grace, which assumes that with the right plan, the desired results will always follow.

In contrast, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson draws from her own reach, which quite literally exceeds her grasp, describing disability not as hubris or failure, but as a generative epistemological posture. She narrates the extent to which her own congenital impairment, which she describes as her ‘unusual, asymmetrical arms and hands’, might help reclaim the metaphor of a reaching beyond an ability to grasp.²⁶⁵

²⁶⁴ Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture*, 114.

²⁶⁵ Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, “What Misfitting Makes,” *Puncta: Journal of Critical Phenomenology* 7, no. 1 (2024): 6.



Figure 4. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, outside Emory University, Atlanta, GA. (Photograph by Ann Borden, for *Emory Magazine*, Spring 2015).

Reframing *reaching* as a striving towards meaning, relation, and participation, and *grasping* as the limits imposed by normative structures or bodily constraints, Garland-Thomson writes:

[M]y bodily experience of reaching and grasping in the world structures how I recognize, incorporate into consciousness, and act upon the received didactic narrative about the gap between an aspirational reach and its realization in the gratification of intention embodied in a successful grasp.²⁶⁶

In the context of the RR programme, this metaphor reveals a tension between a propositional *reach*—the aspirational vision of a growing church—and the material *grasp* of actual attendance, resource limitations, and the reality (results) of growth strategies over several decades. Or to put it another way, the institutional desire for growth exceeds its ability to grasp what it wants. Garland-Thomson’s reconfiguration of reaching and grasping as a phenomenological dynamic of striving and limitation reframes lack not as deficiency but as generative. This reorientation opens space for a theological critique that resists triumphalist narratives of growth and control. Within this frame, the metaphor acquires ecclesiological traction: the church’s reach—its aspirational orientation towards growth—is too often detached from its capacity to grasp the complex, embodied realities of what that

²⁶⁶ Garland-Thomson, “What Misfitting Makes,” 6.

looks like at the margins. It is this disjuncture that Eiesland exposes, pressing the church to reckon not only with the limits of its structures but with the theological imaginaries that sustain them. For Eiesland, the reach extends beyond a language of inclusion or pastoral care and requires a grasp (understanding) of how the church perceives disability, both theologically and socially. She states:

The history of the church's interaction with the disabled is at best an ambiguous one. Rather than being a structure for empowerment, the church has more often supported the societal structures and attitudes that have treated people with disabilities as objects of pity and paternalism.²⁶⁷

As noted in the previous section, Eiesland anchors her theology in the biblical account of Jesus' post-resurrection appearance, particularly in the Gospel of Luke, where Jesus appears to the disciples and explicitly reveals his wounds.²⁶⁸ As she writes:

In presenting his impaired hands and feet to his startled friends, the resurrected Jesus is revealed as the disabled God. Jesus, the resurrected Saviour, calls for his frightened companions to recognise in the marks of impairment their own connection with God, their own connection with salvation.¹⁵

This moment does not depict disability as a healed or transcended condition, but as enduring and salvific, marking a theological departure from eschatologies that spiritualise or seek to erase bodily difference. Accordingly, Eiesland's methodological approach emphasises the symbolic and social reciprocity necessary for a liberatory theology. She asserts that 'a liberatory theology of disability must create new images of wholeness as well as new discourses', thereby establishing the lived experience of disability as a necessary and constitutive element of theological reflection.²⁶⁹ In this way, theology does not simply speak about disabled persons; it speaks from their realities, insisting that theological symbols must be re-read through those whom traditional doctrine has marginalised. This reframing culminates in her powerful articulation of a Christology that neither pities nor erases

²⁶⁷ Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 20.

²⁶⁸ Luke 24

²⁶⁹ Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 92.

disability. Instead, she contends: 'The theological lenses through which we have traditionally viewed our own and others' bodies distort the physical presence not only of people with disabilities but also of the incarnate God'.²⁷⁰ In this assertion, Eiesland reclaims disability as intrinsic to the very identity of God, rather than as a contingent or undesirable condition to be overcome. The disabled God is both divine and disabled, not temporarily but eternally so—an ontological claim with ethical and ecclesiological consequences.

The implications of this Christological vision extend into the life of the church. As Eiesland insists, 'the church, which depends for its existence on the disabled God, must live out liberating action in the world. The church finds its identity as the body of Christ only by being a community of faith and witness, a coalition of struggle and justice, and fellowship of hope'.²⁷¹ Thus, Eiesland presents a theology that demands both doctrinal and ecclesial transformation, whilst eschewing any sentimental inclusion of those labelled disabled into existing church structures. This is a call not for assimilation but for reformation, given that the 'struggle for wholeness and justice begins with the practices and habits of the church itself'.²⁷²

Questioning notions of perfection

Implicit to Eiesland's Christological imperative is the critique of body representations that assume a preferential normative position. The ecclesiological implications of this are prescient in relation to church growth imperatives in search of institutional reform: none more so than the RR programme. Eiesland's call for structural reformation thus invokes a radical theological and ecclesiological recalibration, grounded in the lived experience and theological subjectivity of those labelled disabled. By contrast, the RR programme deploys

²⁷⁰ Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 99.

²⁷¹ Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 104.

²⁷² Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 111.

the language of ‘reform’ within a managerial and technocratic framework—echoing much of the medical model and gaze that assumes control of the body—aiming to address institutional decline, financial sustainability, and leadership restructuring, rather than a prophetic call to recognise the church, as a body with real limitations. Whilst Eiesland’s conception of reform calls for a structural and symbolic reconstitution of the church’s understanding of personhood and embodiment, the RR programme frequently reflects a rationalism that prioritises operational efficiency for the sake of numerical growth and institutional resilience. The language of strategy and management dominates over the theological position of repentance or solidarity. This distinction is not merely rhetorical; it reveals a fundamental divergence guiding much of the contemporary ecclesiological trends within the Church of England.

Eiesland’s theology insists that the body of Christ—marked, wounded, and disabled—should become, in Healy’s terms, the new ‘ecclesial horizon’ for inclusion, rather than a supplementary template to be retrofitted into existing structures. In contrast, however, the RR programme frames inclusion more as a byproduct of structural resilience and growth than as the central theological imperative. References to ‘inclusion’ within RR programme documentation tend to give little detail beyond the locus of growth interests.

Charting the growth observed in cathedrals and ‘greater churches’ (network churches with a public cathedral-like ministry), the ‘From Anecdote to Evidence’ report cites ‘growth factors’ in quantitative and generalised terms.²⁷³ The list of factors includes ‘new services and congregations’, ‘cultivating mission intentionality’, and notably, ‘promoting inclusion and diversity in worship, membership and outreach’.²⁷⁴ The language of inclusion remains somewhat nebulous in all growth-related texts and papers, and the RR programme, more

²⁷³ Voas et al., *From Anecdote to Evidence*, 24.

²⁷⁴ Voas et al., *From Anecdote to Evidence*, 24.

specifically, does not engage with disability either theologically or symbolically. The disabled body, if acknowledged at all, is seen through the (medical) lens of access and compliance rather than as a source of ecclesiological revelation or renewal. This is notable in the report of *The Church Growth Research Programme*: ‘Numerical change in church attendance: National, local and individual factors’, which identifies the impact of architectural modifications:

Renovations can make the building seem more friendly and inviting; “We have recently completed some building works, so we have a welcoming glass door, disabled access and toilets. This means we can offer a wider range of activities to a full age-range and be more inclusive.”²⁷⁵

This disparity exposes the limitations of the Church of England’s reform discourse and echoes the concerns raised by the likes of Brock that once the necessary infrastructural improvements have been made, any interpersonal change becomes less important. When ‘reform’ is conceived narrowly in these terms, it fails to interrogate the theological imaginaries that perpetuate the exclusion of difference in the first place. In this light, Eiesland calls for reform to be rooted in a vision of the disabled God, not just in the practical issues of accessibility, but in the theological reconfiguration of what counts as sacred, normative, and fully human. As she states, ‘a theology of disability must be made a visible, integral, and ordinary part of the Christian life and our theological reflections of that life.’²⁷⁶ She further cautions against what she calls a ‘special interest perspective’, stating: ‘The consequences of relegating a theology of disability to an occasional and peripheral concern can be disastrous not only for people with disabilities, but also for institutional integrity and justice.’²⁷⁷

In this light, the Church of England’s *Renewal and Reform* (RR) programme, while ostensibly future-facing, risks replicating old exclusions under new administrative

²⁷⁵ Voas and Watt, *Numerical Change in Church Attendance*, 61.

²⁷⁶ Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 75.

²⁷⁷ Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 75.

paradigms. Eiesland's work challenges such initiatives to go beyond strategies of institutional survival and to undertake a deeper ecclesiological metanoia—one that begins not with metrics, but with the marks of Christ's wounded body. Reform, in this theological register, is not a strategic adjustment; it is a cruciform reorientation. Without such a reformation, the church may become efficient but remain theologically impoverished and, ironically, bodily incomplete.

Summary

While the language of growth within the RR programme appears pragmatic and managerial, it is also sustained by implicit cultural imaginaries that equate ecclesial health with a particular kind of healthy body, through an emphasis on numerical expansion and institutional efficiency. By engaging Martyn Percy's methodology of implicit theology, we begin to glimpse the performative dimensions of ecclesial identity—those habitual, often tacit practices through which theological meaning is mediated and enacted. Such an approach exposes the extent to which the RR programme discourse is shaped by a seemingly unacknowledged cultural gaze, one that privileges idealised forms of embodiment and obscures alternative, less visible modes of ecclesial flourishing. By attending to this gaze, we begin discerning how the church risks internalising reductive metrics as theological norms, thereby conflating statistical growth with faithfulness and vitality. As such, this section has argued that a more theologically robust account of the church must resist these performative pressures and instead reclaim a vision of ecclesial identity attentive to complexity, contingency, and divine grace. In so doing, it becomes possible to imagine the body of Christ not as a perfected form conforming to external ideals, but as a dynamic, imperfect, and responsive community whose witness is shaped as much by its style and posture as by its proclamations and programmes.

Critically engaging the RR programme through this theological framework reveals the need to question the underlying anthropologies and ecclesiologies that animate institutional reform. A church driven by corporate rationality and performative inclusion fails to ask whose bodies are being prioritised, and at what cost. In contrast, the liberatory ecclesiology of disability, highlighted by Eiesland, begins with relational solidarity, with those on the margins, whose lives resist assimilation to dominant norms and instead offer a radically different way of being the body of Christ. This ecclesiology does not seek merely to integrate disabled persons into the existing church, but to allow their presence and knowledge to reconstitute the very nature of ecclesial life. In this regard, Healy's insistence on ecclesial fallibility offers a path beyond both ecclesial idealism and ecclesial despair. The church, like the disabled body under the medical gaze, is itself a site of tension between visibility and invisibility, between projected ideals and lived reality. But precisely in this space, disability theology becomes a prophetic catalyst, exposing false universalities and inviting the church to more deeply embody the radical hospitality of the Gospel.

To be the body of Christ is not to be whole in the sense of unimpaired, the perfect body, but to be bound together in love across difference, wounds, and weakness. The ecclesial challenge, then, is to cultivate not a gaze of scrutiny and correction, but a gaze of communion—a way of seeing that recognises, welcomes, and is transformed by the presence of those the world (and sometimes the church) has rendered marginal. It is to these vulnerable bodies we now turn.

3.3

Profound Disability: *Finding the limits of a body*

The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!" On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable.

1 Corinthians 12.21-22

Introduction

The concern of this chapter has been to explore the potential difference disability makes in the formation of ecclesiology. This approach assumes the welcome, participation, and full belonging of those labelled disabled as the given duty of care by the church. The task at hand is to understand the extent to which disability theology can transcend the human body to articulate the body of Christ, as the church. Accordingly, disability theology serves as an epistemic locus, or in Nicholas Healey's terms, a 'theodramatic horizon' from which ecclesiology can take as a datum to navigate current growth imperatives operant within the dioceses of the Church of England.²⁷⁸ This approach demands a critical reassessment of how bodily difference is understood, not as deviation to be accommodated, but as integral to the authentic representation of the body of Christ.

As we have seen in the previous section, the notion of the perfected body, where disabled embodiment is rendered incongruent with the dominant imaginaries of beauty and vitality, is problematic. Disability theology challenges these hegemonic constructions by rearticulating the value of corporeality beyond normative aesthetic and production standards. Through practices of resistance—ranging from activist interventions to critical

²⁷⁸ Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life*, 76.

media representation—those labelled ‘disabled’ reclaim their presence in public spaces and subvert the exclusionary logic of contemporary desirability and beauty. This aligns with broader critical paradigms, such as body neutrality and crip aesthetics—resisting the gaze that seeks to inspire sympathy, and instead demanding recognition, respect, and complexity—decentring visual legibility and celebrating the multiplicity of embodied experience.

In particular, the burgeoning field of the ‘aesthetics of the undeliverable’—a new genre of disability curating centred on the realities of disability within curatorial and artistic practice—that resists the compulsion to resolve, choosing instead to dwell in the space of what cannot be captured, communicated, or completed.²⁷⁹ Rather than adhering to normative expectations of coherence, clarity, or successful transmission, this aesthetic framework embraces fragmentation, deferral, opacity, and failure as sites of generative meaning. Ultimately, it contests the assumption that all experience must culminate in resolution or arrive at a final, intelligible form. It is an invitation to attend to the limits of representation and the possibilities that arise precisely within those limits.

In this final section, we will explore these limits through the entangled relationship between the disabled body and power as it relates to discourses regulating bodily difference, whereby certain lives face conditions of exclusion, surveillance, or abandonment. By tracing the historical and contemporary constructions of disability, as both a lived experience and a site of biopolitical control, the disabled body becomes situated at the heart of debates about sovereignty, productivity, and belonging. In a reparatory move, we will return to Nancy Eiesland’s theology of the *disabled God*, to challenge these dominant paradigms by reimagining vulnerability and embodiment as sources of value and resistance to growth-centred ecclesiologies. Drawing on Judith Butler’s conception of the body as fundamentally

²⁷⁹ Amanda Cachia, “Crip Curation and the Aesthetics of the Undeliverable,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 22, no. 3 (December 2023): 321.

relational, dependent, and exposed, the discussion will critique ecclesiologies shaped by managerial and market-driven logics, particularly those that prioritise numerical growth and institutional efficiency. The question this section asks is not whether the church can grow *numerically*, but whether it can grow *gently*, more attuned to the lives, voices, and presence of those who, in their vulnerability, reveal the very heart of the Gospel. We begin within these limits.

Limiting factors

Within theological and ethical contexts—particularly in disability theology, apophatic traditions, and post-traumatic hermeneutics—the aesthetics of the undeliverable acts as an instructive counter-narrative to normative ideals of renewal. It affirms those lives, bodies, and experiences that elude legibility within dominant paradigms of beauty, purpose, or utility. In this respect, the undeliverable becomes not a deficit to be overcome, but a theological and epistemic resource that reveals the limits of representation and the possibilities that reside within those limits. As noted in the first section of this chapter (3.1), the ‘limits model’ developed by Deborah Creamer is significant in advancing an aesthetic that resists the demand for total comprehension or salvific neatness, privileging instead the ethical weight of what remains unsaid, unfulfilled, or unreturned. As she highlights:

Some limits are viewed negatively, or are ones we seek to overcome. These interpretations are based on values and are deserving of reflection (ethical as well as theological). The limits model allows us to examine the values and choices involved in our attitudes toward limits, both specific and general. It also highlights the degree to which limits contribute to human identity, culture, and community.²⁸⁰

In this way, Creamer invites a posture of attentiveness to what cannot be delivered in full—whether in language, image, or embodiment—and thus reconfigures the very grounds upon which bodily difference is constructed and received.

²⁸⁰ Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology*, 102–03.

If the disabled body is to be taken seriously as a theological locus, it must also be situated within systems of power—medical, legal, ecclesial, and cultural. In these contexts, the disabled body is not a neutral datum; it is a body that is politically marked and deeply entangled in the biopolitical operations of both the state and the church, determining whose bodies are visible, viable, and valuable. Within these pressures of market forces, Sharon V. Betcher notes that bodily worth is too often calibrated according to capitalist values of productivity, efficiency, and the capacity to contribute. She writes:

While it has always needed a disposable population, capitalism—with its inherent duties to be healthy, fit, and spiritual—unloads itself of bodies too heavy or cumbersome for an economic system committed to growth. Persons with disabilities not only feel like but are treated as economic burdens, redeemable to the point that social and scientific technologies or charities turn our bodies into profitable industries.²⁸¹

The corollary of cultural commitments to growth and the contemporary discourse of decline within the Church of England is illuminating. Further to this observation, Belcher highlights the extent to which anthropological analyses of power, particularly those informed by Michel Foucault's concepts of biopolitics and governmentality, reveal how institutions regulate and control bodies through medical, legal, and social policies. A clear example of this can be seen in the Quality Adjusted Life Year (QUALY) calculations associated with those whose lives are measured as being too 'heavy' or 'cumbersome'. As Brian Brock most clearly contends:

To remain present with the mentally disabled is to discover a radically different order of values than those assumed in the continuums that drive both the bourgeois and the QUALY moral calculus. Yet both the QUALY and the sense of a good life available to the intellectually disabled remain concerned in their own ways with *livable* lives.²⁸²

Historically, this regulation has manifested in practices such as institutionalisation, forced sterilisation, and medical interventions aimed at 'correcting' bodily differences. Such practices reflect broader societal efforts to manage and discipline bodies in accordance with normative standards of ability and productivity.

²⁸¹ Betcher, *Spirit and the Politics of Disablement*, 14.

²⁸² Brock, *Wondrously Wounded*, 132.

In regard to the church, Amos Yong locates these same normative biases as originating in distorted readings of the Old Testament. Instead, he suggests that by rereading scripture through a mode of lament, complicity with stigmatisation becomes self-evident, and invites a ‘call to awaken ableists’ in the retrieval of disability narratives that evoke repentance, solidarity and prayer acting in accord towards social transformation.²⁸³ This theological and political critique gains further depth when considered alongside contemporary anthropological approaches, which expand the analysis of disability by highlighting the intersectional and socially constructed narratives that reclaim it as a source of agency, pride, and collective solidarity. To deepen this understanding of the theological and political marginalisation of disability, it is necessary to examine its historical construction, particularly how ancient societies inscribed bodily difference with meaning, exclusion, or invisibility.

Homo sacer and ‘bare life’

In tracing the origins of the disabled body in the ancient Near East, Neal H. Walls offers something of a prolegomenon to the vast scope of ancient Mesopotamian and Egyptian textual sources. He notes that current scholarship on the representation of disability in ancient Near Eastern sources remains a burgeoning field, retaining only a limited scope of interest, stating: ‘What little work has been done has usually assumed a medical model of disability or discussed medical aspects of textual depictions.’²⁸⁴ Given the infrequency of references to individuals with physical or cognitive ‘disability’ (as understood through modern frameworks) in ancient Near Eastern records, Walls cites the work of Martha Lynn Edwards, pointing out that these records are often difficult to trace, as people with

²⁸³ Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*, 45.

²⁸⁴ Neal H. Walls, “The Origins of the Disabled Body: Disability in Ancient Mesopotamia,” in *This Able Body: Rethinking Disabilities in Biblical Studies*, ed. Hector Avalos; Sarah Melcher; Jeremy Schipper (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 13.

disabilities were often well integrated into society through productive means. As such, what may be considered a physical disability by modern sensibilities, such as a missing limb or mobility issues, would easily be overlooked if alternative modes of production were found. In other words, if you were capable of labour (as *homo faber*), regardless of any cognitive or physical impairment, you would not be classified as 'disabled'. Conversely, if a person's impairment were entirely debilitating, preventing productive participation, their social status precluded them from any public record. In essence, if a person was not economically productive, they were not a person. Much like the precarious life of a refugee, they were reduced to what Giorgio Agamben calls 'bare life'.²⁸⁵

At the core of Agamben's analysis is the classical Greek distinction between *zoē*—the simple biological life common to all living beings—and *bios*—the form or manner of participatory life proper to a given group or society. In ancient thought, *zoē* was consigned to the private sphere of the *oikos*, while *bios* animated the *polis*. The introduction of *zoē* into the space of the *polis*, what Agamben calls the 'politicization of bare life', marks for him the defining event of modernity.²⁸⁶ Here, life is no longer the passive substrate of politics but becomes its very object. The result is the biopolitical condition: a mode of governance wherein life itself—its sustenance, regulation, visibility, or abandonment—becomes the central concern of sovereign power. In this respect, Agamben takes up and critically extends Michel Foucault's notion of biopolitics, framed as the shift from an old sovereign power, characterised by 'the right to take life or let live', to a modern form of power centred on the ability of the sovereign to 'make live and to let die'.²⁸⁷

²⁸⁵ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 8.

²⁸⁶ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 4.

²⁸⁷ Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–76*, trans. David Macey, ed. Mauro Bertani; Alessandro Fontana (New York: Picador, 2003), 241.

For Foucault, modern power is characterised by its diffuse, disciplinary, and productive capacities—its ability to create docile bodies and manage populations. However, Agamben is not content with Foucault’s dual analytics of disciplinary technologies and technologies of the self. He argues that Foucault’s framework lacks a unifying concept that would explain how techniques of individualisation and totalising structures of governance converge in a single political space.

Agamben’s contribution is to locate this convergence in the figure of ‘bare life’—the body reduced to biological existence that can be excluded from legal protections yet remains subject to political control. He contends that Foucault left unexamined the originating intersection between the legal-institutional and the biopolitical, particularly the sovereign decision that delineates who is included within the political community and who is reduced to *homo sacer*. Thus, where Foucault historicises the emergence of biopower as a modern phenomenon, Agamben radicalises the claim that biopolitics is as old as the sovereign exception, and the inclusion of *zoē* within the space of law through its exclusion (inclusion by means of exclusion) is the originating act of Western politics.²⁸⁸

It is in this space of abjection that Eiesland intersects with Agamben, albeit from a theological inquiry. Eiesland’s disabled God takes what has been socially and religiously excluded—disabled embodiment—and re-centres it within the very nature of the divine. If Agamben laments the transformation of *zoē* into the subject of sovereign control, Eiesland sanctifies *zoē* by interpreting it not as abjection but as incarnation. The resurrected Christ, bearing the marks of his impairment, becomes the paradigm of a divine life that is not abstracted from pain, dependency, or corporeal difference, but fully enmeshed in it. Her theology offers a redemptive inversion of Agamben’s diagnosis, revealing the possibility of

²⁸⁸ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 9.

reclaiming bare life not through political sovereignty, but through radical inclusion and embodied solidarity.

And yet, both thinkers converge in recognising the aporia of modern democracy. Agamben contends that modern politics attempts to transform bare life (*zoē*) into a politically qualified life (*bios*), but in doing so, risks collapsing the distinction altogether. This creates a paradoxical condition: democracy promises emancipation through the very mechanism—biopolitical control—that enables new forms of domination. Eiesland's theology similarly confronts this paradox by refusing the liberal fantasy of inclusion predicated on normalisation. The disabled God is not a healed or perfected being who re-enters the polis; rather, Christ's wounded body becomes a political-theological challenge to the very norms that define inclusion and exclusion. Agamben's critique of Foucault rejects the notion of life as a projection or product of State power, but rather the universalisation of bare life shifting to the centre ground of the public square. As such, he compels us to account for the sovereign decision that founds biopolitical space, a space where inclusion is always already premised on a constitutive exclusion. To this end, Eiesland offers a reparatory response—not through a return to sovereign categories, but through a theological reordering of value, where the vulnerable body is not merely included but revealed as a constituent part of the body of Christ. Further to this, Luke Bretherton highlights the challenge of bare life, as seen in the plight of refugees, which challenges the contemporary church to reckon with its own sense of a duty of care. Accordingly, he contends this concern:

[...] necessitates a consideration of the relationship between worship and Christian witness, as it is worship that constitutes the church as a *res publica* or social and political body in itself and contradicts how we are formed into a public life shaped by dynamics driven by the state or market.²⁸⁹

²⁸⁹ Luke Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics: The Conditions and Possibilities of Faithful Witness* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 143.

Ultimately, the relationship between *bare life* and disability is not static but dialectical. The lives of those labelled ‘disabled’ have often been subjected to conditions that mirror the abandonment and legal exception Agamben describes. Yet, at the same time, they have refused this reduction, resisting it through collective action, a radical reimagining of embodiment, and demands for recognition that extend beyond survival to flourishing. Disability, then, does not illustrate *bare life*—it complicates and contests it, revealing the extent to which power operates on the body, as well as how the body can resist, endure, and reconfigure the terms of political life itself. This dynamic tension between subjection and resistance, exclusion and reconfiguration, invites a broader inquiry into the nature of embodied life itself—an inquiry that Judith Butler takes up by foregrounding vulnerability and interdependence as fundamental conditions of corporeal existence.

Vulnerable bodies and embodied interdependence

In challenging the paternalistic power of discourses narrating ‘vulnerable groups’, Judith Butler articulates a conception of the body that resists reduction to either individualist or collectivist ontologies.²⁹⁰ Rather, she asserts that the body emerges as a site of exposure and interdependency, constituted through and sustained by networks of social, material, and institutional relations. Under these conditions, Butler highlights the extent to which the body, in the posture of protest or resistance to social regulation, retains a capacity to persist even when dominating forces threaten its existence. As she contends:

[The body] acts as its own *deixis*, a pointing to, or enacting of, the body that implies its situation: *this* body, *these* bodies; *these* are the ones exposed to violence, resisting disappearance. These bodies exist still, which is to say that they persist under conditions in which their very power to persist is systematically undermined.²⁹¹

²⁹⁰ Judith Butler, *The Force of Non-Violence: An Ethico-Political Bind* (London: Verso, 2021), 185.

²⁹¹ Butler, *The Force of Non-Violence*, 197.

Further to this resistance, Butler asserts that embodiment is therefore not expressive of an autonomous subject or reducible to a unified collective will; instead, the body is ontologically defined by its constitutive dependence on other bodies and the sustaining infrastructures within which it is embedded.²⁹² This echoes the Pauline vision of the church highlighted in the opening to this section, that ‘the head cannot say to the feet, “I don’t need you!” On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable.’²⁹³ This intercorporeal and intersubjective relational ontology challenges any conception of the body as being either wholly discrete or fully amalgamated with others.²⁹⁴ In Butlerian terms, the very boundaries of the body both differentiate and expose it to a social and material world that conditions its viability and agency. As she concludes:

It is not just that this or that body is bound up in a network of relations, but that the boundary both contains and relates; the body, perhaps precisely by virtue of its boundaries, is differentiated from and exposed to a material and social world that makes its own life and action possible.²⁹⁵

To care about growth, therefore, is a commitment to the conditions necessary for the body to belong, bound in identity to the other.

Questioning ecclesial limits

The implications of this for a growth-orientated ecclesiology are that any theological vision that contests the viability of the church within a managerial logic frames the body as a problem to be diagnosed and fixed (echoing much of the medical model and gaze). This can be seen in the ‘Church Growth Research Programme’ report written by David Voas and

²⁹² Butler, *The Force of Non-Violence*, 197.

²⁹³ 1 Corinthians 12.21b-22

²⁹⁴ For more on Intercorporeality, see: Christian Meyer; Jürgen Streeck; J. Scott Jordan, *Intercorporeality: Emerging Socialities in Interaction*, 1st ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017). On embodiment and intercorporeal intertwining as the constitution of culture, see also: Dermot Moran, “Intercorporeality and Intersubjectivity: A Phenomenological Exploration of Embodiment,” in *Embodiment, Enaction, and Culture: Investigating the Constitution of the Shared World*, ed. Christoph Durt, Thomas Fuchs, and Christian Tewes (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), 25–26.

²⁹⁵ Butler, *The Force of Non-Violence*, 197–98.

Laura Watt, which identifies that parish churches are ‘well embedded in rural communities, but they are often numerically weak and financially struggling’.²⁹⁶ Their analysis is then modelled by a ‘growth-share matrix’ that charts the potential areas for growth and concludes that ‘offering a suite of services is only viable if you have the numbers to fill them.’²⁹⁷ This example of organising logic is understandable within the context of commerce, but remains questionable for the community called church.

As we have seen, Eiesland’s theology of the disabled God reorientates this normative ecclesial vision—conflated with the metrics of contributive worth—towards a different sort of body, one that is not seen as a deviation from normativity (market success), but a locus of divine presence and ecclesial faithfulness. In this context, the comparative methodology adopted by this thesis extends Eiesland’s assessment of the social-symbolic relationship between the church and those labelled disabled, offering a crucial theological lens to question the applicability of market-driven logic to the life of the church.

This ecclesial horizon challenges current Church of England growth programmes shaped by numerical targets and managerial logic that consider growth to be ‘a product of good leadership (lay and ordained) working with a willing set of churchgoers in a favourable environment’. Growth is thus the result of positivist logic, which is inevitably measured through the metrics of expansion, replication, and institutional efficiency.²⁹⁸ Such models risk privileging congregations or clergy perceived as strong, productive, or ‘strategic’, while overlooking or even disempowering communities whose gifts do not align with normative expectations of perceived success. This logic is most explicitly highlighted by Voas and Watt, who make clear that:

One of the difficulties for the Church of England is that its traditional rural strongholds and its new centres of urban growth are so different. The church is faced with a strategic challenge: the

²⁹⁶ Voas and Watt, *Numerical Change in Church Attendance*, 27.

²⁹⁷ Voas and Watt, *Numerical Change in Church Attendance*, 28.

²⁹⁸ Voas and Watt, *Numerical Change in Church Attendance*, 2.

question is whether the focus should be on supporting areas of existing strength or on developing churches that are growing but not yet as significant in absolute terms.²⁹⁹

In this framework, interdependence becomes commodified, valuing those in need only insofar as they provide an opportunity for others to demonstrate care, mission, or resourcefulness. Eiesland's theology disrupts such logic by privileging presence and agency that is known with, in, and through limitation. Likewise, David Pailin's relational ontology exposes how even the strongest or most 'successful' congregations are only ever constituted in and through the sustaining presence of others. As he contends:

That the worth of handicapped people is not to be established by finding some contributory value in the need of help does not mean that such persons are not to be helped. What is mistaken is to hold that their need of support in any way justifies their state or establishes their worth as members of the human community. They are persons in their own right.³⁰⁰

Accordingly, church growth ought to be reframed within a far larger picture, within the solidarity of mutual recognition, where the flourishing of one part of the body cannot be anticipated at the expense, or the obfuscation, of the other. True growth lies not in seeking autonomy or strategic replication, but in deeper participation in a shared ecclesial existence marked by vulnerability, dependence, and care.

This returns us once more to the Barthian conception of church growth (renewal) as being 'extensive' (with measurable outcomes) or 'intensive' (following faithful witness). For Barth, the former must serve as a result of the latter, or risk becoming meaningless.³⁰¹ This is not an escape from the realities of numerical decline, but a preference for prophetic witness over strategic gains. Such a vision calls for an ecclesial polity that recognises all parts of the body are indispensable—not for what they produce, but because they are vital in their own right—bearing the image of Christ, who is not exempt from bodily limitation, but revealed within it.

²⁹⁹ Voas and Watt, *Numerical Change in Church Attendance*, 2.

³⁰⁰ David A. Pailin, *A Gentle Touch: From a Theology of Handicap to a Theology of Human Being* (London: SPCK, 1992), 108.

³⁰¹ Barth, *CD IV/2*, IV.2, 648.

Similarly, John Swinton, in his pastoral and practical theological writings—reflecting upon disability and ageing—reframes ecclesiology around the concept of absence. Much like Brian Brock, he argues that the church is called beyond the language of ‘inclusion’ towards a community of belonging transformed by those whom society tends to exclude. As Swinton writes: ‘To be included, you often have to conform or have your context conformed to some kind of relational, social or legal norm. To belong, you simply have to be noticed as yourself. To be included, you just need to be present. To belong, you need to be missed.’³⁰² Simply being and being missed seem to be what is missing in much of the RR programme discourse, which seeks a more mechanistic model of the church, overlooking the theological significance of presence, vulnerability, and interdependence as constitutive of ecclesial life. An example of this is clearly articulated by Voas and Watt, who appear to take the view that elderly members of the congregation hold back churches. That congregants (as sheep) may be better guided (or herded?) towards those churches with desirable vitality, thereby bringing others to join them. In this way, the church is diminished as a vendor of spiritual services. As Voas and Watt write:

The easiest (and even in the short term the most fruitful) steps at parish level may not promote the strategic mission of the wider church. To take an extreme example, local churches might find that the largest gains were made by focusing on the elderly. While improving provision for the oldest generation is admirable, it will not solve the underlying problem of generational decline. A more common situation is that some churches grow at the expense of others. Sheep are not stolen; they simply choose their fields, and it is helpful to understand why they roam. Nevertheless it would be pointless (from the perspective of the church as a whole) to put enormous efforts into activities that simply shift people from one parish to another, unless the aim is to invest in some churches and to close others.³⁰³

The idea of ‘pointless’ activity reminds us that within the organising logic of the RR programme, any effort necessitates a measurable and targeted outcome.

³⁰² John Swinton, “From Inclusion to Belonging: A Practical Theology of Community, Disability and Humanness,” *Journal of Religion, Disability and Health* 16, no. 2 (2012): 184.

³⁰³ Voas and Watt, *Numerical Change in Church Attendance*, 60.

Gentle bodies

However, this raises the question: What if the body of Christ is not strong, but gentle? In response, John Swinton contends that theological engagement with disability is not peripheral but essential to a faithful understanding of God, the human condition, and the nature of the church. Through an extended theological reflection, rooted in a two-year research project on the spiritual lives of people with developmental disabilities and their carers, Swinton concludes that ‘the Body of Christ has profound developmental disability’.³⁰⁴ Through this bold claim, he joins Eiesland’s call for the church to reimagine itself through the lens of vulnerability, friendship, and interdependence.

Drawing on the lived experiences within L’Arche communities—intentional, faith-based groups where people with and without intellectual disabilities live and share life together—Swinton observes they provide a ‘powerful exemplar of Christian community’ and a concrete expression of what he calls ‘graceful communities’.³⁰⁵ In this way, Swinton locates the relationship between members of L’Arche as the locus where theology is performed rather than theorised. In this way, disability becomes ‘a particular way of being human which needs to be understood, valued and supported’, rather than a problem to be diagnosed or solved.³⁰⁶

In accord with Eva Feder Kittay, Martha Nussbaum, Brian Brock, Yong, and Eiesland, Swinton challenges the dominant cultural narratives equating human worth with achievement and success. He notes that ‘within a society that uses the criteria of independence, productivity, intellectual prowess and social position to judge the value of human beings, there will always be questions relating to the value of people with this

³⁰⁴ John Swinton, “The Body of Christ has Down’s Syndrome: Theological Reflections on Vulnerability, Disability, and Graceful Communities,” *Journal of Pastoral Theology* 13, no. 2 (2003): 77.

³⁰⁵ Swinton, “The Body of Christ has Down’s Syndrome,” 67.

³⁰⁶ Swinton, “The Body of Christ has Down’s Syndrome,” 68.

profound type of disability'.³⁰⁷ Yet in the context of L'Arche, people with profound disabilities are not seen as burdens but gifts. In an Augustinian turn, he observes that just as friends are brought to us by God, L'Arche communities welcome all people as a gift, whereby a 'gift is something to be received with thankfulness and love for what it is, not for what it might become or for what it is not. A gift is loved because it is a gift.'³⁰⁸

Stanley Hauerwas extends a similar reflection of L'Arche communities to develop what he calls a 'politics of gentleness' that challenges the construct of freedom within liberal political theory.³⁰⁹ Reflecting on Hans Reinders' ethical analysis of disability, Hauerwas contends that freedom in the context of the church is not a matter of acquiescing to a neo-liberal construct of personhood as a self-made story and consumer choice, actuated by normative cognition. Instead, he notes, that when the efficacy of reason and free will becomes the substance of identity, people with mental disability lose moral standing and a greater sense of personhood. As Reinders highlights:

[P]eople with mental disabilities are lacking to a greater or lesser extent the powers of reasons [sic] and free will. Since these are the powers that bring substance to the core values of the liberal view on public morality, mentally disabled people never acquire full moral standing in this view. This is because its moral community is constituted by 'persons' and these, in turn, are constituted by the powers of reasons [sic] and free will. This conception of the person is particularly problematic with respect to the inclusion of severely mentally disabled citizens, since on the liberal view only persons in the sense of rational moral agents can be the recipients of equal concern and respect.³¹⁰

This critique of personhood lays the groundwork for a vision of the church rooted in mutual care. Recognising the church as a network of interdependent bodies gives rise to a gentler ecclesiology, one shaped not by strength but through solidarity with 'those parts of the body', as the Apostle Paul notes, 'that seem to be weaker' (1 Cor 12:22). In this way, vulnerability

³⁰⁷ Swinton, "The Body of Christ has Down's Syndrome," 67.

³⁰⁸ Swinton, "The Body of Christ has Down's Syndrome," 68–69.

³⁰⁹ Stanley Hauerwas and Jean Vanier, *Living Gently in a Violent World: The Prophetic Witness of Weakness* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 81.

³¹⁰ Hans S. Reinders, *The Future of the Disabled in Liberal Society: An Ethical Analysis* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), 15–16.

is not a condition to be overcome, but a divine gift that opens us to the other and makes possible the reception of God's grace.

Conclusion

churches are communities that make it possible to belong. Yet communities are rarely perfect and, as Thomas Reynolds observes, are frequently 'subject to assimilative and exclusionary practices that judge others according to fears and prejudices based in the cult of normalcy'.³¹¹ As we have seen, this normalcy impacts the possibility of being missed, of being wanted in the first place. At the heart of this vision lies a relational ecclesiology, in which community is understood not merely as a social arrangement, but as mutual availability, compassion, and fidelity through practices of welcome, care, and the acknowledgement of shared need, rather than conformity to norms of sufficiency or strength. Crucially, disability lies at the theological centre of this approach, whereby impairment is not construed as a deviation from the ideal human form, but as an ecclesiological horizon that accepts the reality of dependence, limitation, and the necessity of God's grace.

Throughout this chapter, the ecclesiological assumptions underpinning the Church of England's RR programme have been critically engaged with using the Pauline metaphor of the body of Christ as an analytical lens. This exploration of bodily limitation and ecclesial interdependence calls for a radical reimagining of what it means for the church to grow. Drawing on the theological insights of Healy, Swinton, Eiesland, Creamer, and Brock et al., we are invited to move beyond ecclesiologies framed by strength, strategy, and managerial logic, towards a gentler vision of the body of Christ—one marked by mutual dependence, presence, and care. The prevailing assumptions of growth as expansion,

³¹¹ Thomas F. Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2008), 129.

efficiency, or replication risk rendering invisible those communities and persons who do not fit within dominant paradigms of success. In a church rooted in the life of Christ, whose own body bore the marks of vulnerability, such weakness is not a deficit—it is the very space where God’s grace becomes known.

This theological anthropology resists the instrumentalisation of bodies within growth models that privilege normative metrics of vitality. Instead, it affirms a form of ecclesial life attuned to the presence, agency, and witness of those frequently marginalised or rendered invisible within dominant paradigms. The lived practices of communities such as L’Arche, and theological articulations of disability as a locus of divine encounter, disclose the inadequacy of frameworks that equate value with contribution or success. As such, the church is called not to optimise or manage its members, but to receive them as gifts—each bearing witness to a divine economy grounded not in scarcity or performance, but in God’s grace.

In this light, ecclesial growth must be reframed as an intensification of faithful presence rather than a quantifiable expansion. This does not amount to a denial of decline or a retreat into ecclesiological idealism; rather, it constitutes a theological critique of the assumptions underlying growth discourse, and a reorientation towards the church’s vocation as a community of mutual care. Within this framework, the so-called ‘weaker’ members are not liabilities to be managed, but the very means through which the church apprehends its calling. Growth, therefore, is not a product of strategic intervention, but a manifestation of the church’s participation in the life of the triune God, whose strength is made perfect in weakness, and whose body is revealed most fully in the shared vulnerability of interdependent life.

In the next chapter, our focus turns more directly to how anthropological assumptions shape ecclesiological visions, particularly in relation to contemporary growth narratives

within the Church of England. As we consider how bodies are imagined within these frameworks, it becomes vital to develop a theological lens that centres, rather than marginalises, disability and embodied vulnerability. Doing so will allow us to interrogate not only what it means to be a body, but what kind of body the church imagines itself to be—and what it might mean for that body to decline, grow, or even flourish.

CHAPTER 4.

Discerning the Body: *Reading the church through disability*

The problem with disability: *Anthropological beliefs, limits, and autonomy*

Introduction

To this point, we have been exploring the question: What does it mean to be a body? In addressing this, the Christian tradition has historically relied on biblical imagery that describes the church as being the ‘body of Christ’. However, we have also seen that these analogical and metaphorical conceptions of the church have contributed to a complex and often narrow perspective of those whose bodies are labelled ‘disabled’. Yet if the church is to embody the life of Christ, it follows that any assumptions we make about our bodies, whether anthropological, theological, or liturgical, hold profound significance in shaping the meaningful life of the church *as* a body.

From a cultural perspective, bodies serve as sites for social constructions of what is considered ‘abled’ or ‘disabled’, where moral significance is typically shaped by a medical model that prioritises normative ideals of perfection (or ‘blueprints’ of the body). For the *Renewal and Reform* (RR) programme, there is a clear emphasis that the healthy body, the one considered ‘viable’, is the growing body, active in its mission to make more disciples. But the question remains: what if the local church fails at this task? What sort of body has it become? This chapter will explore these questions and examine the extent to which a hermeneutic of disability might assist in tracing and critiquing these current ecclesiological trends towards programmes of numerical growth within the Church of England.

To begin, this first section will examine the influential work of Deborah Creamer, specifically her ‘limits model’ that challenges traditional notions of bodily perfection and instead offers a theological perspective of limitation as an inherent aspect of our existence,

which she asserts is ‘a natural and good aspect of being human’.³¹² Accordingly, rather than a fixed or binary construct used in contrast to conceptions of ability (some can, whilst others cannot), Creamer asserts that disability is a fluid and intersectional category. Rather than only some people *being* limited, she contends that *all* people have limits. As such, if ecclesiological discourse and programmes for growth reinforce idealised or normative conceptions of embodiment, they risk obscuring those bodies that fail to conform to these same standards. Instead, an ecclesiology informed by Creamer’s insights calls for a renewed perspective, one that embraces diverse embodiment as central to the grounded reality of the body of Christ rather than a deviation in need of correction.

As a means of reframing the discourse, Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of embodiment will also be introduced as a lens through which to assess the limitations of church growth methodologies. His work, particularly *Phenomenology of Perception*, emphasises the extent to which human experience is fundamentally embodied and that our perception of the world is shaped by our bodily being-in-the-world.³¹³ This challenges positivist notions of growth or the disembodiment of the church as a bodily system to be managed, suggesting instead that self-perception—including awareness of disability or limitation—is mediated through the structures of bodily and social experience. The implication of this is that the church must, therefore, re-engage with embodied reality—including finite resources, the lived experiences of its members, and the implications of growth methodologies on the life of the local parish. This alignment with Creamer’s account of limitation calls for an acknowledgement of both human and institutional finitude rather than the anxious pursuit of growth. Instead of striving for an abstracted vision of success (or viability) detached from embodied life, the question this raises for ecclesiology

³¹² Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology*, 32.

³¹³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald Landes (Oxford: Taylor & Francis Group, 2012), 84.

is how to cultivate an attuned responsiveness to the voice of God, in which care, presence, and relational depth become the means by which the conditions of growth may be discerned. Such a comparative methodological approach (as outlined in Chapter 1.2) does not introduce a rival account but reconfigures the posture of engagement, enabling these models to be read in relation to one another so as to expose their limitations and the positivist rationalities shaping the intentions of the RR programme.

To further develop this hermeneutic of disability, we turn first to an anthropological perspective of the body that challenges the biomedical and essentialist understandings of the body by preferencing the social, cultural, and political dimensions of bodily difference. In doing so, disability is not treated as a special case scenario or instrumentalised for reasons of advancing a particular theory but instead as a critical framework for rethinking ecclesiology itself—interrogating how the church, as a body, is constituted, perceived, and experienced by all.

Anthropological beliefs

As we have seen in the previous chapter, the medical model seeks to categorise and differentiate between bodies. This is not entirely unhelpful—not least as our bodies are subject to the effects of suffering and time—but the application of this model and the extent to which some bodies become preferential is not without significant ethical, social, and theological implications. Tracing its origins, disability studies locates the establishment of this model through the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF), the epidemiological, clinical and health systems tool that provides an international standard language and framework for describing health and health-related states.

Developed by the World Health Organization (WHO), the ICF categorises aspects of health into separate body functions and structures, activities, and participation, considering

both *capacity* (what a person can do) and *performance* (what they actually do in their lived environment). From a disability studies perspective, the ICF claim of a comprehensive framework for decision-makers has received a mixed reception. While the ICF represents a significant and welcomed shift towards a biopsychosocial model—the intersection of the biological, psychological and social dimensions of health and wellbeing—it has been heavily criticised by disability studies for sustaining a medical model that limits the recognition of disability as a socially constructed phenomenon. Whilst the ICF attempts a holistic approach to disability by incorporating environmental and social factors, it still places considerable emphasis on functional limitations and impairments, which, as Jerome E. Bickenbach argues, only serves to reinforce the medicalised perspective rather than reframing disability in a rights-based or social model.³¹⁴ Moreover, the ICF's focus on data collection and standardised classification is seen as insufficient for developing policies that directly address systemic barriers such as ableism, discrimination, and accessibility. Or, to put it another way, the mechanisms of measurement fail to encapsulate the sorts of relationships and connections necessary to sustain human dignity.

Conversely, disability studies advocate for a more participatory approach centred around the lived experiences of disabled individuals, recognising that disability policies should not merely classify but also tackle structural inequalities that promote social change (and education). Thus, while the ICF serves as a useful tool for research and policy planning, it must be complemented by frameworks that prioritise accessibility, inclusion, and human rights to be truly comprehensive in addressing the delicate and complex nuances of disability. As Bickenbach concludes:

[T]he problem with the definition of disability is not that there are many of them—we should expect that. The problem is that we forget that our definitions are merely tools designed for specific purposes and start to think of them as universal and all-purpose. This is to confuse definition with conceptualisation, and defining with theoretical modelling. To elevate a 'fit for purpose' semantic tool to a conceptual characterisation of disability is to court disaster; a legal definition appropriate for a human rights treaty would be useless and unfair as a tool for setting

³¹⁴ Bickenbach, "The ICF and its Relationship to Disability Studies," 56.

criteria for assistive technology eligibility, and a clinical definition for rehabilitative treatment planning would be, as the history of the Americans with Disabilities Act attests, a poor choice for a human rights document.³¹⁵

Accordingly, the reduction of bodies to mere systems, organs, and parts for the benefit of focused diagnostic procedures and treatments risks privileging certain bodies over others, which, in turn, reinforces hierarchies of ability, shaping access to resources, participation, and dignity within society. This process is not merely descriptive but *prescriptive*, determining whose bodies are deemed valuable, functional, or even worthy of care. Such differentiation, as we have explored, reflects deeper cultural assumptions about normalcy, dependence, care, and human worth, raising critical questions about justice, inclusion, and the theological meaning of embodied difference. Creamer is critical of these distinctions and observes that differences are too often ‘combined with a value judgement: some bodies do not function as well as other bodies, and it is best to be as close as possible to an ideal body (beautiful, fit, thin, able).’³¹⁶

In contrast, an anthropological perspective of the body viewed through the lens of disability challenges this biomedical and essentialist understanding by emphasising the social, cultural, and political dimensions of bodily difference. Rather than viewing disability as a purely medical or biological condition, anthropology considers how societies construct, interpret, and respond to embodied diversity. This approach highlights the extent to which the experience of disability is shaped by cultural norms, structural inequalities, and systems of power that define what constitutes a ‘normal’ or ‘able’ body. Central to this anthropological inquiry is the recognition that the body is not merely a biological entity but is deeply embedded in social and cultural symbols. As anthropologists Margaret Lock and Judith Farquhar note: ‘If bodies and lives are historically contingent, deeply informed by culture, discourse, and the political, then they cannot be summed up in any one kind of

³¹⁵ Bickenbach, “The ICF and its Relationship to Disability Studies,” 56.

³¹⁶ Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology*, 53.

narrative.³¹⁷ To this end, it is essential that in developing a hermeneutic of disability, those who experience disability are not reduced to mere motifs, tokens, or instrumentalised for the purpose of a reductive theological formulation. As Lock and Farquhar highlight, the renewed interest and recent scholarship in human sciences exploring the plurality of human, carnal experiences have made clear that what is meant by ‘the body’ is not a singular, self-contained entity but rather is the development of recognising the multiplicity of bodies shaped by history, culture, discourse, and politics. This recent shift challenges the traditional Cartesian body-mind distinction (in all its variations) and rejects the idea of a universal human nature. Instead, they suggest a more authentic anthropological account of the body is understood to be dynamic, intersubjective, and deeply embedded in social and historical contexts rather than merely a biological or mechanical entity serving as host to personality. Or, to put it another way, ‘the body’ is more than the containment of organised organs, systems, and limbs bound within a singular experience. As Lock and Farquhar surmise:

What the body is, however, cannot be simply stated or presumed in theory on the basis of our own historically located and specially restrictive experience. To make bodies a topic for anthropological, humanistic, sociological, and historical research is to ask how human life can be and has been constructed, imagined, objectively known—in short, lived.³¹⁸

The centrality of lived experience, essential to the anthropological approach, resonates well with any ecclesiological enquiry concerned with methodologies seeking tangible outcomes. Accordingly, how the church is experienced as the body of Christ is a window into the contemporary sociological proclivities as much as it is the prevailing theological convictions.

Returning to Bourdieu’s conception of ‘habitus’, this section engages the work of anthropologists such as Lock, Farquhar and Nancy Scheper-Hughes, who use his theory to identify the prevalence of social inequalities based on bodily norms that have been culturally

³¹⁷ Judith Farquhar and Margaret Lock, “Introduction,” in *Beyond the Body Proper: Reading the Anthropology of Material Life*, ed. Judith Farquhar and Margaret Lock (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007), 2.

³¹⁸ Farquhar and Lock, “Introduction,” 2.

constructed and are historically contingent.³¹⁹ Building on Bourdieu's account of social and cultural reproduction, they critique the medical model as 'caught in the clutches of the Cartesian dichotomy', where bodies are reduced to machines or systems.³²⁰ Against this reduction, they contend that any illness, sickness, or deviation from bodily normalcy, 'is not just an isolated event, nor an unfortunate brush with nature.'³²¹ Instead, they contend:

It is a form of communication—the language of the organs—through which nature, society, and culture speak simultaneously. The individual body should be seen as the most immediate, the proximate terrain where social truths and social contradictions are played out, as well as a locus of personal and social resistance, creativity, and struggle.³²²

Disability, therefore, is not a fixed or universal experience but something that is understood differently across individuals, societies, places, and time. As a socially and culturally constructed category, disability reveals the way that different cultures interpret physical and cognitive differences. Some view those labelled 'disabled' as being a marker of spiritual significance (as a site of divine grace) or a means of fostering a sense of special belonging. In contrast, others stigmatise any perceived deviation from an idealised human 'normalcy' as being 'broken' or a 'special case' of biological deviation (or affliction). These contrasting perspectives highlight the way in which social symbols and cultural narratives shape how disabled bodies are perceived and received as being 'other' (and undesirable).

Building on the anthropological perspective, which prioritises bodily experience, the phenomenological approach—especially as influenced by Maurice Merleau-Ponty—emphasises the centrality of embodiment and the extent to which the limitations of all human bodies inform our being in the world. Therefore, rather than viewing disability solely as a deviation from biological normalcy, Merleau-Ponty helps frame our being

³¹⁹ Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Margaret Lock, "The Mindful Body: A Prolegomenon to Future Work in Medical Anthropology," *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 1, no. 1 (1987). For more on this see also: Margaret Lock and Judith Farquhar, *Beyond the Body Proper: Reading the Anthropology of Material Life* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007).

³²⁰ Scheper-Hughes and Lock, "The Mindful Body," 30.

³²¹ Scheper-Hughes and Lock, "The Mindful Body," 31.

³²² Scheper-Hughes and Lock, "The Mindful Body," 31.

embodied as more than a sequence of biological or mechanical processes but a fundamental way of participating in the world. Key to this idea is his concept of ‘bodily spatiality’, which rejects the notion of space as a neutral, external dimension and instead shows that space is lived, embodied, and shaped by movement, habit, and perception.³²³ Unlike Cartesian or objective views of space that treat the body as an external object moving within a neutral, measurable environment, Merleau-Ponty argues that space is not independent of the body but fundamentally structured by it, stating that ‘the experience of one’s own body teaches us to root space within existence.’³²⁴ As such, much like Charles Taylor, Merleau-Ponty reframes the subject-object dualism to assert that ‘to be a body is to be tied to a certain world, and our body is not primarily in space, but is rather of space.’³²⁵ Essentially, we return to the claim that we do not have a body; we are a body.

This same perspective has also been instrumental in the field of disability studies, shifting attention away from medicalised deficit models towards the experiential and relational aspects of disability found in the ‘social model’.³²⁶ For individuals with disabilities, the experience of embodiment is deeply shaped by material, cultural, and political conditions, including the accessibility of physical spaces, technological mediation (such as prosthetics or wheelchairs), and societal attitudes. Disability, from this perspective, is not simply an inherent impairment but is situational, dynamic, and mediated through the body’s interaction with its surroundings. Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the ‘body schema’, *un schéma corporel*, is therefore particularly significant in reframing participation and contribution from a set of objective measurements towards a lived, pre-reflective understanding of movement and space.³²⁷

³²³ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 149.

³²⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 149.

³²⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 149.

³²⁶ Kevin Paterson and Bill Hughes, “Disability Studies and Phenomenology: The Carnal Politics of Everyday Life,” *Disability and Society* 14, no. 5 (1999).

³²⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 101.

From an impairment perspective, disruptions to this body schema—whether congenital, environmental, or through injury—are absorbed to reconfigure belonging and worth within the world. Accordingly, the social model of disability differentiates bodily *impairment* from those that are socially constructed forms of *disablement*, emphasising that disability arises from societal barriers rather than individual deficits (or subjective body limitations). As Paterson and Hughes point out, the distinction between *impairment* and *disability* serves as a foundational principle of radical disability studies.³²⁸ As Merleau-Ponty states: ‘The body is the vehicle of being in the world and, for a living being, having a body means being united with a definite milieu, merging with certain projects, and being perpetually engaged therein.’³²⁹ Under these conditions, it is not enough to say that bodies are neutral or passive precultural objects but are instead contingent upon the context and culture they inhabit.

For the church, this could be seen as a challenge to the current trends and concerns about decline. The church, as the body of Christ, is a body in time and culture. Thus, rather than a mode of deficiency, disability is better understood as an embodiment that authentically accounts for a specific socio-cultural context. As contemporary scholars of disability studies, such as Kevin Paterson, Bill Hughes, and Margrit Shildrick argue, disability is not a fixed state but an ongoing negotiation of bodily and environmental relationships within the public square.³³⁰ Therefore, instead of conceptualising disability as being a purely physiological limitation, perception and embodiment are fundamentally interwoven, shaped by personal experience and the world’s reception of different human bodies.

³²⁸ Paterson and Hughes, “Disability Studies and Phenomenology,” 598.

³²⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 84.

³³⁰ Paterson and Hughes, “Disability Studies and Phenomenology.” Margrit Shildrick, “Critical Disability Studies: Rethinking the Conventions for the Age of Postmodernity,” in *Routledge Handbook of Disability Studies*, ed. Nick Watson and Simo Vehmas (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020).

Building on this anthropological understanding of disability as a dynamic and relational experience, it is important to examine how theological perspectives have historically contributed to an understanding of bodies and limitations. While disability studies challenge the notion of impairment as a deficiency, theological discourse within the Christian tradition has often acquiesced to this same view, locating disability as a deformity in need of redemption (suffering narrative) or as a virtuous exemplar of spiritual endurance (hero narrative). Whether anthropological or theological, both approaches have, according to Deborah Creamer, failed to adequately account for a holistic view that balances the spiritual, material, and ecclesial dimensions of disability, stating:

The silence of disability studies on issues of religious significance distances the field from the real-life values and commitments of many people with disabilities, ignoring that God may have meaning (whether positive, negative, or ambiguous) in the lives of many people with disabilities. By failing to address issues of significance in the lives of the people it speaks for and with, disability studies falls short of its own commitments to inclusivity and relevance.³³¹

As we work towards a hermeneutic of disability, Creamer's critique essentialises the need for a theological framework that neither marginalises nor diminishes the lived experiences of people with disability as mere symbols. Rather than perpetuating narratives that position disability as a problem to be solved or an exemplar of spiritual endurance, theological discourse must account for the full complexity of embodied existence. This necessitates moving beyond binary categories of 'normal' and 'abnormal' to embrace human finitude as a fundamental aspect of bodily existence.

We will now explore this further through Creamer's theology of limitation, which reconfigures traditional understandings of embodiment, challenging the medical model assumptions, and offers a constructive vision for an ecclesiological engagement with disability.

³³¹ Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology*, 78–79.

A theology of limitation

As we have seen in the previous chapter, the medical model of disability is fundamentally reductionist, treating the body as an object to be diagnosed, fixed, or improved according to preconfigured standards or metrics of health and well-being. Deborah Creamer's critique of the medical model marks a significant shift in theological and philosophical discussions on disability, challenging conventional notions of normalcy, embodiment, and human limitation. Creamer challenges the underlying assumptions of the medical model (as sustained by the ICF metrics of capacity and performance), highlighting the extent to which this model propagates a vision of disability as being deviant to an idealised norm, framing bodily variations primarily in terms of pathology, deficiency, and the need for correction. She contends this perspective reinforces a binary distinction between bodies considered to be 'normal' and those which are 'abnormal', with a diminishing effect upon those who do not conform to the ideal expectations of physical or cognitive performance.

Creamer notes that within the Christian tradition, disability has been received by one of two dominant polemic perspectives: either as a mark of divine blessing or as a form of divine punishment. She observes that even in contemporary Christianity, 'pastors and other worship leaders still perpetuate unrealistic images of people with disabilities as either pitiful or inspirational.'³³² Within these constructions, people with disabilities all too easily become objectified as signs or tokens of God's power—through miraculous healing or as symbols of suffering—rather than being recognised as individuals with complex and ordinary human experiences. As such, Creamer calls for a theological vision of disability shaped by a generative reading of embodied limits that value inherent human dignity without resorting to reductive narratives of pity, cure, or erasure. However, compounding these theological narratives are the hermeneutics derived from biblical interpretations that use disability as a

³³² Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology*, 36.

metaphor for sin or spiritual deficiency. Phrases such as ‘I once was blind, but now I see’ (John 9:25b) have been used to equate physical impairment with ignorance or moral failing, which only serve to reinforce negative stereotypes about disabled bodies. Similarly, the New Testament’s portrayal of Jesus healing the blind, the lame, and the deaf often frames disability as a condition to be cured rather than as an inherent and valuable aspect of the human experience. Furthermore, theological reflections on Saint Paul’s ‘thorn in the flesh’ (2 Corinthians 12.7) have led to varied interpretations—some seeing it as a literal physical disability, others as a metaphor for personal struggles—illustrating the extent to which Christian traditions have interpreted bodily difference in ambiguous ways. In the context of the church, Creamer highlights the way in which this equates to a form of suffering in search of healing. She states:

When people with disabilities have been considered at all, they have historically been looked at as symbols of sin (to be avoided), images of saintliness (to be admired), signs of God’s limited power or capriciousness (to be pondered), or personifications of suffering (to be pitied)—very rarely are people with disabilities considered first as people.³³³

What makes the medical model problematic is that it fails to account for the lived and real experiences of those labelled ‘disabled’, particularly as it relates to personhood and narratives of affliction. In response, Creamer proposes a theologically grounded ‘limits model’, reframing human embodiment in a way that neither idealises ability nor stigmatises disability.³³⁴ Central to her model is the assertion that all human beings experience limitation to a greater or lesser extent—whether through ageing, illness, or other forms of bodily or cognitive difference—and that these limitations are intrinsic to the human condition rather than deviations from an ideal, universalised state. She is clear that disability should, therefore, not become an afterthought to models of embodiment, stating that:

[T]he limits model has potential insofar as it highlights the fact that we all experience limits, that these limits differ, and that these limits are accepted, rejected, accentuated, complicated, degraded, and lived in many different ways. It offers us the ability to think of the presence of limits as a natural and good aspect of being human that at the same time is inherently difficult

³³³ Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology*, 36.

³³⁴ Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology*, 93.

and challenging. It provides us with a new paradigm to make sense of ability and disability [...] Key to the limits model is the recognition that “disability” is actually more normal than any other state of embodiedness.³³⁵

As a mode of *process* theology, Creamer’s theological model emphasises the expectation of an evolving relationality and interdependence, which in turn frames embodiment as something dynamic, shared between all people. The limits model thus serves to critique theological narratives reinforcing binary, ableist assumptions that disability is a form of divine punishment (pity) or a condition in need of miraculous healing (inspiration). Essentially, what Creamer is calling for is the reimagining of limitations as a normal part of human life. Yet she also draws our attention to ways in which we stigmatise and normalise different limitations, which in turn marginalise capabilities.

In developing her model of limits, Creamer highlights the work of Sallie McFague, who advocates reinterpreting disability beyond universalising paradigms. For McFague, our use of models should not be static but, instead, allow for a dialogical coherence between the Christian tradition and a scientific worldview. Accordingly, McFague proposes four criteria for evaluating the suitability of such models: congruence with embodied experience; continuity with the Christian tradition; commensurability with postmodern science; and a concern for the well-being of all creation.³³⁶ Each criterion seeks to assess whether the model proposed is ultimately helpful or harmful. However, Creamer is clear in her critique of McFague, who fails to attend to experiences of disability, situating them instead within a broader ‘randomness of life’.³³⁷ Despite this, what Creamer draws from McFague’s model is the importance of the particular as a significant datum for theological enquiry. Accordingly, by reframing disability as part of the ordinary and particular human experience, Creamer’s limits model resists exclusionary narratives that either pathologise or idealise

³³⁵ Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology*, 32.

³³⁶ Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1993), 149.

³³⁷ Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology*, 68.

disability. This prompts us to return to an earlier question: when we think of a body, what sort of body are we thinking of?

Furthermore, this move to the particular aligns with the work of Nancy Eiesland, whose concept of the 'disabled God' advances a vision of divine embodiment that affirms disability as central rather than peripheral to Christian identity. Her critique reinforces this shift by exposing the reductive binaries that have historically shaped Christian perceptions of disability, calling instead for a theological vision that fully acknowledges the complexity and dignity of people with disabilities. As Eiesland notes:

The persistent thread within the Christian tradition has been that disability denotes an unusual relationship with God and that the person with disabilities is either divinely blessed or damned: the defiled evildoer or the spiritual superhero. As is often the case with such starkly contrasting characterisations, neither adequately represents the ordinary lives and lived realities of most people with disabilities.³³⁸

This framing of disability not only distorts the lived realities but also reinforces an exclusionary language that represents a significant challenge to contemporary ecclesiological use of the 'body of Christ'. By construing disability as an anomaly or deviation, such perspectives risk marginalising disabled persons rather than recognising disability as an intrinsic and valuable dimension of human identity. Accounting for this limitation is crucial in furthering a hermeneutic of disability capable of critiquing the contemporary ecclesiological paradigms of growth. Rather than viewing disability as a challenge to be explained away or overcome, this hermeneutic must instead seek to expand our understanding of diverse embodied experiences, valuing all bodies as constitutive descriptors of the church. This approach thus affirms that disability is not merely an object of theological intrigue or speculation but a lived reality that must shape Christian thought and practice. By positioning limitation as a theological and existential reality rather than a defect, Creamer invites a rethinking of the frameworks through which embodiment,

³³⁸ Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 70–71.

disability, and the nature of human existence are constructed. This, in turn, calls for a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of what it means to be enfleshed and connected—not seeking to eliminate difference but rather to embrace it as a meaningful and valuable aspect of God’s good creation.

The implications of what Creamer’s limits model poses for the Church of England should not be underestimated. Universal appeals towards church growth through initiatives, such as the *Renewal and Reform* programme, imply that growth is something that should be expected or anticipated if only the right methods and intentionality are applied. Yet what these appeals fail to recognise or acknowledge is the particularity of the local parish church as a body marked by interdependence, difference, and care. Rather than seeking growth that mirrors the organising logic of managerialism, the real, grounded, and local parish church should instead begin reimagining limitations as an essential dimension to its identity as the body of Christ.

To understand how all this relates more explicitly to developing a hermeneutic of disability, we now return to the earlier exploration of contractarianism and contributive worth that assumes participation through a shared (equal) production of goods.

Modern aspirations of autonomy

Within contemporary liberal thought, autonomy is frequently positioned as the foundation of human flourishing, whereby individuals are expected to achieve self-reliance and minimise dependence on others. However, as we have seen, this framework implicitly marginalises those labelled ‘disabled’, whose lived experiences often necessitate various forms of support, whether through caregiving, assistive technologies, or communal networks. Conversely, a hermeneutic of disability challenges these presuppositions that

dependence signifies deficiency and instead argues that all human beings—regardless of ability—experience limitation and require relational and structural support.

As noted earlier in chapter two, Nussbaum argues a just society must, therefore, ensure that all people, including those with disabilities, are given the opportunity to develop and exercise their fundamental human capacities as equally valued citizens. If people with disabilities are either pitied as those lacking agency or valorised as those who ‘overcome’ their condition, the church fails to recognise their right to shape and participate fully in its life. A capabilities-oriented ecclesiology would, therefore, need to focus on ensuring that disabled persons have genuine opportunities to engage in theological reflection, leadership, worship, and community life rather than merely being recipients of pastoral care or sources of inspiration.

Taken wholesale, this shift would require a fundamental rethinking of liturgical practices, church buildings, and theological frameworks, challenging the church to question and remove both physical and attitudinal barriers to full participation. This does not mean that everyone will share the same human experience, but it does highlight the inadequacy of reductive narratives raised by Creamer and Eiesland that overlook the social and structural conditions creating barriers to societal and ecclesial participation. Accordingly, the application of Nussbaum’s capabilities approach to contemporary ecclesiology thus highlights the need for the church to move beyond a passive language of inclusion towards active, structural change in witness to the particular and local body of Christ. Key to this is the significance of relationality and pastoral care.

Closely aligned to Creamer’s ‘limits model’ is the work of David Pailin, whose book *A Gentle Touch: From a Theology of Handicap to a Theology of Human Being* offers a critical examination of the philosophical and theological foundations of pastoral care. Having begun writing a liberation theology of disability from a position of normativity, he soon

realised that we all face limits of varying degrees (emotionally, spiritually, physically). As such, he concluded that a vision of human flourishing based on what we accomplished is theologically impoverished, particularly if we consider our sense of worth in light of being cared for by another within the all-embracing love of God. As is common with disability theology, Pailin grounds his work in the lived experience of individuals, not as a mode of universalisation or moral quandary, but through theological vignettes that trace the realities and contours of the particular. In keeping with this methodology, Pailin recalls the moment when Alex, a disabled baby, first altered his understanding of what it means for theology to be rooted in the realities of lived experience. Reflecting on his first encounter, Pailin acknowledges his initial misgivings and ‘fear’ of meeting people with either mental or physical disability. However, upon meeting Alex, he discovers the capacity for new ways of gentle care and communication (touch and blowing bubbles), which reconfigures his perspective of ‘otherness’ and opens the possibility of redefining self-hood altogether. He writes:

Alex’s worth is not a matter of his having satisfied some external or internal goals. It is in his having been himself. And Alex’s being himself was not in fulfilment of anyone’s expectations—his own, his parents’, his doctors’, or God’s. It was to be. The same is true of every person.³³⁹

Pailin observes that this form of social imaginary, seeking extrinsic ends and autonomy, is rooted in a narrow conception of human flourishing—one that assumes ‘we want others to want to be like we want to be’.³⁴⁰ This presupposes a fixed social, political, and economic norm acting as a kind of cultural ‘blueprint’ for the good life. Implicit in Pailin’s analysis is the idea that human beings inherently possess all they need to exist as they are. However, this raises the question: how does this understanding relate to the productive presence of the other within the context of a community? Pailin shares this concern, suggesting that ‘if the worth of human beings depends on the value of what they contribute, some might argue

³³⁹ Pailin, *A Gentle Touch*, 10.

³⁴⁰ Pailin, *A Gentle Touch*, 10.

that those who cannot contribute significantly (and even more those whose demands leave them net debtors of value) should be deemed disposable when resources are limited'.³⁴¹

This aligns with earlier concerns raised about the Church of England's contractarian impulse towards cooperative arrangements, which seems to guide the Parish Share formula (based on fixed percentages, financial banding, or negotiation at a deanery level).³⁴² In turn, the financial contributions of local parish churches to diocesan funds invariably ascribe a productive value to the local parish church. Rather than measuring the church's vitality by its capacity for achievement or productivity, an ecclesial vision of flourishing should move beyond the dominance of social contract theory—framing competition as the natural and expected mode of autonomous existence—towards one founded on limits, mutual care, and interdependence.

In this way, a hermeneutic of disability challenges the aspiration for autonomy, reframing dependence not as a failure of individual agency but as an inherent and theologically meaningful aspect of embodied existence. This perspective critiques the competitive and individualistic ethos reinforced by modern social contract theory and emphasises the church as a community of interdependence in which all bodies—irrespective of capacity—are integral to its life and mission. Pailin's theology of care aligns with this ecclesial vision, as he highlights:

Whether value is considered to be quantifiable in monetary or in physical terms, or to be a matter of aesthetic enrichment, a person's significance is not determined by the value of what she or he contributes to others' experiences. Nor does the principle that a person's significance lies in the value of what he or she contributes become valid if God is held to be the ultimate judge and recipient of that value.³⁴³

³⁴¹ Pailin, *A Gentle Touch*, 13.

³⁴² For more on this, see: Hannah Silcock and Dave Stout, *Parish Share: What Makes a Difference?*, Church of England (Giving Directorate, March 2024), <https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/building-generous-church/webinars-and-training/parish-share-report-march-2024>.

³⁴³ Pailin, *A Gentle Touch*, 13.

Rather than rejecting autonomy wholesale, a hermeneutic of disability reframes agency as being situated rather than isolated, embodied within relations of care and mutual love rather than remote radical self-sufficiency. Under these conditions, difference is not merely accommodated but recognised as a constitutive aspect of God's good creation.

Pailin's emphasis on inherent worth aligns with a hermeneutic of disability that resists frameworks grounded in economic or utilitarian assessments of bodily and human significance. This hermeneutic is further developed by Hans Reinders and John Swinton, who similarly interrogate the ways in which societal narratives construct disability as a condition of limitation and suffering rather than as an integral aspect of human diversity. Their work extends Pailin's concerns by exploring how relationality, care, and vulnerability not only redefine the meaning of flourishing but also expose the inadequacy of philosophical models of personhood that privilege autonomy and rational agency. Through an engagement with the lived experiences of parents caring for disabled children, Reinders, in particular, reveals the limitations of prevailing cultural assumptions and underscores the formative power of caregiving relationships in shaping new understandings of love, dependence, and human identity.

Reinders explores the extent to which parents of mentally disabled children, despite their initial apprehension and concern, manage to discover a sense of purpose and meaning from their experiences and poses the question: 'What is it that can make caring for such a child an enriching experience?'³⁴⁴ He notes parents reporting that whilst they found the initial diagnosis devastating, ultimately, they found fulfilment in their experience caring for their disabled child. What may have initially appeared as a life of challenge can, for some, instead become a source of enrichment (he does, however, acknowledge this is not the case for all parents and that some can find the experience overwhelming). Reinders goes on to

³⁴⁴ Reinders, *The Future of the Disabled in Liberal Society*, 160.

examine how these parents derived their positive experiences from raising their disabled child despite societal expectations to the contrary, which prioritises normative views of 'healthy' children as the measure of a good life. He observes:

Perceptions of disabled lives in our society are determined by the prospect of diminishing expectations and disappointments, both for one's family and oneself. Given these perceptions, the presumption that disabled people and their families suffer from their hardships is very influential in our society.³⁴⁵

Reinders frames this view within what he terms the 'presumption of suffering' that positions prevention as the obvious choice, thereby depicting the acceptance of a disabled child as irrational, which naturally leads many to consider prenatal screening, avoiding the birth of a disabled child altogether. After all, who would put themselves through such suffering? The implication is that viability is grounded in societal normativity and that autonomy, or self-reliance, determines that, subjectively speaking, the challenge is too great, given the social imaginary of what a flourishing life looks like. Reinders argues this view is mistaken but concedes that this can only become intelligible through the formative experience of *care-giving* for dependent others. It is not enough to theorise, and in this way, love is not a metatheory but only known through the act of caring.

Much like Palin's experience of meeting Alex, if the only frame of reference for those without direct experience of disability is one grounded in societal norms, precluding those who are vulnerable or in need of care, then an inevitable form of alienation occurs. Fear of the unpredictable or unknown is unnerving, and it is the presumption of what constitutes suffering that belies the prospect of what caring for someone with disability really means.

In response, Reinders challenges the way that literature deals with stories about parental experiences, which he observes are frequently oriented towards the way that parents feel about caring for a disabled child, reifying their emotions as a sequence of positive or negative experiences that on balance, serve to determine an accurate representation of the

³⁴⁵ Reinders, *The Future of the Disabled in Liberal Society*, 160.

obvious choice (termination). However, this is only to tell half the story of the ontological nature of parenting (caring), shaping the attitudes and beliefs through the experience of caregiving. As Reinders points out: 'To take [parents'] motivations seriously, we should not only ask how their lives feel but also which beliefs and attitudes entered into the formation of the kind of character that produced these feelings'.³⁴⁶ It would seem that in the crucible of caregiving, these formative experiences shape what it means to recognise the value of bodies of difference. This is not to simplify or deny that parents of disabled children have much to worry about or that they may face times of grief and despair, but that having a child in need of care has wholly enriched, rather than deteriorated, their lives. However, despite claims to the contrary, as Reinders observes, 'many religious people *do* believe that disabled people *are* defective human beings and that their disability is a sign of their defectiveness'.³⁴⁷ As we have seen in the previous chapter, bodily perfection or the pursuit of attaining it haunts the imagination of a church in search of mechanisms for growth. Under these conditions, the body perfected (the healthy church) is an intention that can be realised.

Summary

As we move towards the next section, it is worth reminding ourselves that by interrogating anthropological assumptions, limitations, and modern aspirations of autonomy, we have uncovered how disabled bodies can so easily become marginalised, both in society and within the church. Through the work of Creamer, Pailin, and Reinders, we have also observed that disability further highlights the need to rethink ecclesial boundaries and belonging beyond functionalist and utilitarian paradigms, recognising that limits are not a deficiency but the site of revelation, embracing all forms of human embodiment. In doing

³⁴⁶ Reinders, *The Future of the Disabled in Liberal Society*, 161.

³⁴⁷ Hans S. Reinders, *Disability, Providence, and Ethics: Bridging Gaps, Transforming Lives* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2014), 11.

so, we begin to see how disability serves as a critical lens through which to assess broader theological assumptions about identity, wholeness, and the nature of communal belonging within the church. Thus, what we have seen is that an ecclesiology viewed through a hermeneutic of disability recognises that the church's life does not rest upon ideals of strength, growth, or productivity, but upon the grace of shared limitation and interdependence. As the body of Christ, the Christian community is constituted by the dignity of all its members, where difference is not a deficit to be overcome but a gift through which the church might faithfully flourish and grow.

These insights lay the groundwork for further exploration into the broader dimensions of theological alterity. As such, the next section will extend this inquiry by examining how theological notions of difference, especially around the 'stranger' and the legacy of Docetism (denying the fully human body of Christ), have reinforced ecclesial exclusions—and how a theology from the margins may reimagine the church as a community that fully embraces embodied diversity.

Theological alterity: *Tracing the boundaries of difference*

Introduction

On 15 September 2005, a new sculpture, *Alison Lapper Pregnant*, was unveiled in London on the Fourth Plinth in Trafalgar Square (see fig. 5). The work of artist Marc Quinn, it weighed 13 tons and stood just over 3.5 metres high. Quinn saw the placement of Alison as a ‘monument to the future’, celebrating ‘a new kind of hero’ as ‘someone who has conquered their own circumstances, rather than someone who has conquered the outside world’.³⁴⁸



Figure 5. Marc Quinn’s sculpture was unveiled in London on the Fourth Plinth in Trafalgar Square (Marc Quinn, *Alison Lapper Pregnant*, 15 September, 2005, Marble sculpture, 355 x 180.5 x 260 cm, <http://marcquinn.com/artworks/single/alison-lapper-pregnant>).

³⁴⁸ “Alison Lapper, 2000—2012,” Marc Quinn, accessed 19 November, 2024, <http://marcquinn.com/artworks/alison-lapper> (Website commentary of ‘Alison Lapper’ sculpture on the Fourth Plinth, Trafalgar Square).

It is a labour of recognition and empowerment, with the explicit intent of challenging societal norms and aesthetic expectations. However, it also plays into the existential crisis of needing to be the master of our surroundings, evoking the subject-object dualism of Cartesian ethics that troubles much of the medical model of disability studies and theology. This desire to ‘conquer’ the self, as expressed by Quinn, fails to acknowledge Deborah Creamer’s conception of limits and the possibility that difference need not be overcome by increasing levels of autonomy.

As Creamer’s limits model has shown, not all bodies are the same. Nor should this difference be regulated or overcome. This is true not only of individual human bodies but also of the ecclesial body—the body of Christ. Given these differences, it follows that each body will experience different limitations. How well the church understands and accepts these differences affects the lived experiences of its members and its ecclesial horizon. To this end, the organising logic of the Church of England’s *Renewal and Reform* programme does not articulate limitation but instead is prone to a language that universalises and obscures difference. Positioned instead as a pragmatic solution to numerical contraction and financial precarity, the RR programme promotes a vision of the growing church measured through quantifiable metrics and managerial frameworks. However, if Creamer’s model is extended towards an ecclesial horizon, it begins to expose not only the extent to which limitation is overlooked but also the degree to which growth methodologies risk inadvertently introducing forms of body regulation into the life of the church itself.

In this next section, we will explore this dilemma and the underlying tension of a tendency to overlook the material and theological reality of ecclesial difference, fragmentation, and decline. By using the early Christological heresy of Docetism—the denial of Christ’s fully embodied human existence—as an analogy, we will explore how certain features of the RR programme risk formulating a disembodied ecclesiology, one that neglects the theological import of loss and limitation. Engaging critically with disability

theology and phenomenology, especially the work of Thomas Reynolds, Nancy Eiesland, and Emmanuel Lévinas, the analysis seeks to reframe ecclesial decline not as a failure to be resolved, but as a theological site that invites deeper reflection on the nature of the church's participation in the cruciform life of Christ. In doing so, we will further develop a robust hermeneutic of disability as a constructive theological response to docetic tendencies within current ecclesial imaginaries of the Church of England, advancing an ecclesiology grounded in embodied presence. We begin by turning to the claims of Docetism.

Docetism and the absent body

The Church of England's *Renewal and Reform* (RR) programme represents a specific organisational response to long-term patterns of numerical decline, financial strain, and perceived missional stagnation. While the stated aim to 'reverse the decline of The Church of England so that we become a growing church' is framed in practical and missionally driven terms, upon closer theological scrutiny, we have seen that the programme exhibits tendencies that could be described as 'docetic'—the belief that Jesus Christ merely *appeared* to be human, denying the fullness of his incarnation, suffering, and bodily existence.³⁴⁹ Whilst the RR programme does not espouse an explicit doctrinal Docetism, aspects of its ecclesial vision suggest an analogous dynamic: a disembodied ecclesiology that struggles to account for decline as a genuinely theological phenomenon.

As we have observed to this point, the RR programme's treatment of ecclesial decline is primarily framed as a problem to be fixed—rather than a theological reality to be engaged with—that traces a docetic tendency to deny or bypass vulnerability and limitation. This echoes much of the medical model of diagnosing disability as a broken body to be fixed, healed, or 'conquered'. In the same way that Docetism rejects the materiality of Christ's

³⁴⁹ Church of England, *Renewal and Reform: A Summary of Progress and Impact*, Church of England (Online, April 2021), 2, https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2023-03/Renewal_Reform_final.pdf.

birth, passion, and death, negating the radical nature of the incarnation—Jesus’ resurrected body as continuous with his earthly body—the RR programme and subsequent growth initiatives within the Church of England (CofE) tend to overlook the incarnational significance of losing trust, fragmentation, ageing demographics, relevance, and the competing demands of a changing social imaginary. Accordingly, these phenomena are often framed as strategic obstacles to overcome rather than potential sites for theological reflection. In doing so, the RR programme risks promoting a vision of the church devoid of the cross-shaped dimensions of ecclesial life, a church that cannot comprehend suffering, grief, or death.

Further to this, the language of success in the RR programme exhibits a tendency to overly spiritualise growth through claims such as being ‘sent to build the Kingdom’.³⁵⁰ Terms such as ‘front-line fruitfulness’, ‘missional opportunity’, and ‘levers of culture change’, found throughout the report, thus function as markers of ecclesial vitality defined through quantitative or managerial criteria.³⁵¹ This creates the potential for theological abstractions through which the power of *resurrection* is emphasised whilst obscuring the call to *cruciformity* (the paradoxical coinherence of strength and weakness).³⁵² In this regard, the RR programme echoes a docetic-shaped ecclesiology, wherein the church is envisioned as being alive and vibrant at the level of institutional appearance (extrinsic growth), while local parish churches—particularly rural, elderly, or economically marginalised—experience decline, loss, and disempowerment. Under these conditions, smaller churches are at risk of being rendered invisible, strategically ‘unviable’, in much the same way the suffering body of Christ was rendered illusory in Docetic Christology.

³⁵⁰ Archbishops’ Council, *Setting God’s People Free: A Report from the Archbishops’ Council*, Church of England (February 2017), 22.

³⁵¹ Archbishops’ Council, *SGPF*, 19.

³⁵² Benjamin White, “Interpreting Pauline Paradox: A Response to Gorman’s Cruciformity Concept,” *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 44, no. No. 2 (2022): 173.

The RR programme's preference for scalable, replicable models of growth—such as large resource churches and strategic church plants—risks obscuring the particularities of the local parish context. This parallels the Docetic impulse to favour the universal and ideal over the concrete and specific. While Fresh Expressions of church and church plants initiated through Bishop's Mission Orders (BMOs) may thrive in city centres or among targeted demographics, such initiatives may unintentionally marginalise the everyday pastoral realities of small, long-suffering communities. An ecclesiology that privileges effervescence, visibility, and initiatives may, therefore, 'appear' vibrant from a national church perspective, but it does not respond to the embodied presence necessary for sustained growth in the grounded realities of the local parish context. While the RR programme is undoubtedly driven by sincere intentions to renew the CofE's mission, its underlying theological imagination risks reflecting this docetic impulse.

By failing to engage with decline as a theologically significant phenomenon—capable of forming the church in humility, patience, and hope—recent growth initiatives in the CofE appear to lack the depth of theological reflection capable of accounting for the embodied realities of difference. Or, to put it more simply, when caring about growth, the universalised 'one size' does not fit all. The refusal (by omission) to acknowledge embodied otherness, therefore, risks reinforcing exclusionary perspectives that marginalise those whose experiences do not conform to idealised notions of human perfection. If the church is to be conformed to Christ, it must learn not only how to rise (renew) but also how to suffer, dwell, and even die faithfully. Anything less risks constructing a church that, like the Christ of Docetism, is vibrant in appearance but lacking in flesh. By contrast, a hermeneutic of disability affirms that recognition of difference and vulnerability is essential to both Christology and ecclesial practice. To counteract these docetic inclinations, it is necessary to return to theological and philosophical frameworks that re-centre the significance of embodied experience.

As noted in the previous section, phenomenology offers a helpful framework for engaging with contemporary disability theology, particularly in light of any docetic tendencies that seem to come in and out of focus within the literature of the RR programme. In this regard, Drew Leder's concept of the 'absent body' highlights how disability can disrupt the 'forgetfulness' of bodily experience, making the body more acutely present in consciousness through what Leder calls 'dys-appearance', the visceral interruption of assumed normalcy. Leder contends that rather than being two disparate things (body-mind) yoked together, or a pure spirit temporarily enfleshed, human experience is 'mentalized embodiment, now with an accent on transcendence or immanence, on self-forgetfulness or self-consciousness, on projectivity or limitation'³⁵³. By moving beyond forms of social dysfunction that medicalise or objectify the body, Leder's concept challenges any docetic tendencies that reject embodied vulnerability by portraying Christ as unaffected by suffering.

Similarly, Thomas Reynolds, in *Vulnerable Communion*, argues that theological anthropology must acknowledge the significance of disability and interdependence rather than privileging notions of autonomy and normalcy. Reynolds contends that human beings naturally desire to belong, and as such, the impulse to conform to social norms is strong. Our acceptance and recognition within society, therefore, depend on how well our lives reflect what culture deems meaningful and valuable. In this way, collective notions of 'the good' shape the moral framework, implicitly communicating what Reynolds defines as 'the cult of normalcy'.³⁵⁴ According to Reynolds, 'normalcy operates as a cultural system of social control'.³⁵⁵ He further cites how this can all too easily become entwined with Docetism, distancing the spirit from the body, assuming that transcendence cannot embrace the

³⁵³ Drew Leder, *The Absent Body* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 149.

³⁵⁴ Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, 59–63; Stanley Hauerwas explores this same idea through what he calls 'the tyranny of normality', Hauerwas, *Suffering Presence*, 214.

³⁵⁵ Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, 48.

captivity of flesh. He refutes this idea, stating: 'Jesus embraces the bodies of others, and does so as flesh and blood himself. The spiritual life is part of embodied life; indeed, it is at the centre of embodied life, connected to our relationships with each other.'³⁵⁶

If Reynolds exposes the cultural and ecclesial mechanisms by which bodies are rendered docetic or deviant, then Nancy Eiesland's work moves decisively to reconfigure the very image of God through the lens of disability. Her theology marks a critical shift from inclusion within existing anthropological paradigms to a reconstitution of those paradigms themselves in light of the incarnation and resurrection. In *The Disabled God*, Eiesland critiques depictions of a non-disabled Christ that implicitly exclude those with disability from theological narratives. Instead, she proposes that through his resurrection, Jesus' transcended body becomes, unlike any other body, retaining his wounds that affirm—rather than reject—disability. In a passage worth citing in full, Eiesland sets out a clear vision for 'the disabled God'. She writes:

Here is the resurrected Christ making good on the incarnational proclamation that God would be with us, embodied as we are, incorporating the fullness of human contingency and ordinary life into God. In presenting his impaired hands and feet to his startled friends, the resurrected Jesus is revealed as the disabled God. Jesus, the resurrected Savior, calls for his frightened companions to recognize in the marks of impairment their own connection with God, their own salvation. In so doing, this disabled God is also the revealer of a new humanity. The disabled God is not only the One from heaven but the revelation of true personhood, underscoring the reality that full personhood is fully compatible with the experience of disability.³⁵⁷

Eiesland's vision of the disabled God not only reshapes Christological imagination but also has profound implications for ecclesiology. The hermeneutic claim here is that by locating disability at the heart of the resurrected Christ, she challenges the church, as the body of Christ, to reckon with the presence of woundedness, contingency, and difference. If, as Eiesland contends, Christ's resurrected body retains 'the marks of impairment', then the church cannot define itself by ideals of perfection, coherence, or strength but, instead,

³⁵⁶ Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, 201.

³⁵⁷ Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 100.

must become a community shaped by practising hospitality towards the other. This theological move opens space for a renewed understanding of the church as a body constituted by, rather than tolerant of, embodied difference.

To advance this critique, we will now turn more specifically to the category of *alterity* as developed in contemporary theological and philosophical discourse to further examine how the irreducible otherness of Christ and the other resists docetic tendencies and grounds a more faithful ecclesial identity.

The face of difference

As the installation of the sculpture ‘Alison Lapper Pregnant’ onto the Fourth Plinth in Trafalgar Square demonstrates, the public presence of disabled bodies disrupts society’s normative assumptions about autonomy, productivity, and wholeness. In this same way, contemporary disability theology engages with philosophical frameworks to critically address and interrupt reductive conceptions of human embodiment and participation. Contemporary philosophical discourse—particularly through the works of Jean-Luc Marion and Emmanuel Lévinas—emphasises that alterity resists assimilation into sameness. Within Christian theology, this principle insists that Christ’s humanity must not be obscured, abstracted, or idealised to the point that it ceases to be truly other. In this way, a theology of alterity challenges docetic views by insisting that the full humanity of Christ is an essential and irreducible aspect of the incarnation and, by extension, of being a body (both human and ecclesial). By affirming Christ’s embodied existence, theological alterity ensures that difference—whether divine-human, interpersonal, or communal—is recognised as a constitutive dimension of Christian identity and ethical responsibility. Whilst theologians such as Eiesland, Creamer, Pailin, and Rebecca Chopp do not explicitly engage with phenomenology in the vein of Heidegger or Merleau-Ponty—placing ontology

as foundational to existence—they do, in many ways, echo Lévinas’ radical responsibility, which prioritises the primacy of ethics over ontology.

In contrast to the dominant Western philosophical tradition, Lévinas argues that ethics precedes ontology as the first and most fundamental philosophical relation prior to our conceptions of being or knowledge. For Lévinas, the encounter with the Other (*l’Autrui*) is fundamentally an encounter with the stranger—an individual who embodies radical alterity—and who cannot be reduced to the self’s categories or brought fully under its control. Lévinas frames this encounter as central to all human relationships, whereby the other resists total possession or comprehension. He writes:

The absolutely other is the Other. He and I do not form a number. The collectivity in which I say “you” or “we” is not a plural of the “I.” I, you—these are not individuals of a common concept. Neither possession nor the unity of number nor the unity of concepts link me to the Stranger [l’Etranger], the Stranger who disturbs the being at home with oneself [le chez soi]. But Stranger also means the free one. Over him I have no power.³⁵⁸

In the context of disability theology, Lévinas’ phenomenology proves particularly helpful in rejecting the docetic tendencies noted above that diminish the significance of human bodies—especially the disabled body—to challenge disembodied or idealised notions of human experience. For Lévinas, this ethical call to respond to the stranger is about the radical alterity experienced in ‘the face’ (*visage*) of the other: ‘we name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other ethics. The strangeness of the other, his irreducibility to the I, to my thoughts and my possessions, is precisely accomplished as a calling into question of my spontaneity, as ethics.’³⁵⁹ This ‘irreducibility’ is what Lévinas refers to as the *infinity* of the other, encountered upon seeing their face, which communicates a significance beyond its ordinary meaning as a human face. Instead, the face reveals the transcendence and alterity of the ‘other’ that beckons (calls) an ethical

³⁵⁸ Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991), 39.

³⁵⁹ Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 43.

response that cannot be reduced to mere physicality or perception. Lévinas contends: “The epiphany of the face is ethical. The struggle this face can threaten presupposes the transcendence of expression. The face threatens the eventuality of a struggle, but this threat does not exhaust the epiphany of infinity, does not formulate its first word.”³⁶⁰ This struggle is not a literal, material conflict but an internal ethical confrontation whereby the subject’s autonomy and self-sufficiency are challenged and reoriented by responsibility towards the *infinite* (irreducible) other. The other cannot be labelled, categorised, or summed up in terms that objectify or contain their being. The implication for disability theology is to attend to, rather than obscure, the discomfort we encounter when called to respond to ‘the face’ (the needs, demands, or humanity) of the other. As such, ‘the face’ is not simply a face in a descriptive or phenomenological sense but representative of divine presence that calls forth ethical responsibility to all, regardless of difference. In turn, this offers a framework for a hermeneutic of disability capable of critiquing ableism and reimagining theology and, more specifically, ecclesiology, as fundamentally responsive to the lived realities of all bodies.

As noted in the previous section, the introduction of phenomenology into disability theology thus challenges the assumption that impairment signifies a bodily degradation from God’s good and created order. For Lévinas, the implication is that ethical responsibility takes primacy over abstract metaphysical or epistemological concerns. Unlike normative ethical frameworks prioritising reason, autonomy, or contractual obligation, Lévinas argues that this ethic emerges directly from the face-to-face encounter with the other. The face, in this sense, is not merely a physical feature but an infinite and non-reductive divine presence that issues a silent but unavoidable command stronger than death.

As Lévinas surmises:

This infinity, stronger than murder, already resists us in his face, is his face, is the primordial *expression*, is the first word: “you shall not commit murder.” The infinite paralyses power by its infinite resistance to murder, which, firm and insurmountable, gleams in the face of the Other,

³⁶⁰ Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 199.

in the total nudity of his defenceless eyes, in the nudity of the absolute openness of the Transcendent.³⁶¹

For Lévinas, the ‘primordial expression’ of the face does not so much ground moral obligation as precede and condition it, placing the subject under an immediate and ineluctable responsibility for the Other. This responsibility is neither voluntarily assumed nor structured by reciprocity but arises as an asymmetrical demand that interrupts freedom and calls the subject into question prior to any act of deliberation.

In this regard, we can see how the language of alterity becomes essential to an ecclesiology capable of comprehending a hermeneutic of disability. Crucial to this approach is the principle of asymmetric responsibility. Lévinas contends that whilst the phenomenology of Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Buber operates through an assumption of reciprocity, the reality is that responsibility for the other is fundamentally asymmetrical. The individual is called to respond to the other’s vulnerability without expecting a return, thus highlighting the radical nature of the ethical obligation. This alterity resists ethical formulations grounded in self-interest or contractarian relations, instead framing moral life through a primary concern for the other. Accordingly, Lévinas shifts the locus of ethical reflection from abstract principles to real, lived encounters, whereby the presence of the other calls for recognition, care, and responsibility.

In contrast to philosophical traditions prioritising understanding and categorisation, or what Lévinas terms ‘totality’, he argues that the face disrupts such frameworks by presenting an encounter that always exceeds the boundaries of theoretical or instrumental reason. The other is not to be assimilated into preexisting categories of thought but must instead be comprehended through their irreducible alterity. As such, Lévinas challenges any ethical

³⁶¹ Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 199.

system that seeks to reduce individuals to mere objects of comprehension or formulation, insisting that the face remains ‘present in its refusal to be contained’.³⁶²

By positioning ethics as fundamentally grounded in the vulnerability of the other, Lévinas thus offers a powerful critique of theological schemes that sustain deficit narratives or marginalise embodied difference. Instead, he invites a reorientation towards the inescapable call of the other, which in the context of church growth necessitates that ecclesiology prioritises radical hospitality, welcome, and attentiveness to those whose bodies are typically marginalised—not as recipients of pity or assimilation but as bearers of a divine alterity who reshape and redefine the very contours of community, worship, and theological understanding.

The implications of asymmetry

The question this raises for a hermeneutic of disability is how the search for reciprocity and friendship can be bridged. As noted previously in Chapter 2.2, Martin Buber’s *I-Thou* philosophy of dialogue seeks to overcome this gap through a moment of mutuality. However, whilst there are overlapping elements, Buber’s framework ultimately diverges from Lévinas’ phenomenology of the stranger. Lévinas critiques Buber’s framing of Thou as being dialogically reciprocal, which fails to acknowledge the profound asymmetry of the ethical obligation. Instead, Lévinas argues that I-Thou does not go far enough in recognising the radical demand that the other (Thou) places upon the self (I). Rather than creating a moment of mutual recognition, Lévinas contends that encountering the other is defined by an inescapable responsibility that remains continually asymmetric and therefore non-reciprocal in nature. The other is not simply a dialogue partner but a being whose alterity remains irreducible (infinite). As Lévinas writes:

³⁶² Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 194.

The relation between me and the other commences in the inequality of terms, transcendent to one another, where alterity does not determine the other in a formal sense [...] Here the alterity of the other does not result from its identity, but constitutes it: the other is the Other. The Other qua Other is situated in a dimension of height and of abasement—glorious abasement; he has the face of the poor, the stranger, the widow, and the orphan, and, at the same time, of the master called to invest and justify my freedom.³⁶³

Whilst Lévinas acknowledges Buber's contributions to the concept of reciprocity, he develops a more radical and ethically demanding philosophy of human encounter that does not assume mutuality. Instead, by emphasising asymmetry, obligation, and the irreducibility of the other (their *infinity*), Lévinas moves beyond Buber's I-Thou framework by critiquing its reliance on reciprocity and collapsing difference through relational unity (or friendship). For Lévinas, the encounter with the other is not an invitation towards dialogue but a summons to responsibility, a call that precedes consciousness, will, and the expectation of return. In this sense, Lévinas calls for a profound reorientation of relationality grounded in radicalised, pre-ontological responsibility.

Reflecting this same emphasis on asymmetric responsibility, Eva Feder Kittay reconceives moral obligation through the lens of care and dependency, particularly in relation to those with cognitive disability. In much the same way as Lévinas critiques Buber's I-Thou framework, Kittay argues that personhood and moral worth must not be predicated on reciprocal recognition or mutuality. Instead, she critiques models of moral personhood that rely on characteristics such as rational autonomy or reciprocity—qualities that may not be present for those with severe physical or cognitive impairment. She contends this is bound to a socialised normality whereby the 'identities that we acquire are ones in which social relations play a constitutive role, conferring moral status and moral duties. These identities are part and parcel of a social matrix of practices, roles, and understandings, which are themselves enmeshed in a moral world'.³⁶⁴ In this way, Kittay's

³⁶³ Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 251.

³⁶⁴ Eva Feder Kittay, "At the Margins of Moral Personhood," *Ethics* 116, no. 1 (October 2005): 111.

ethics of care align with Lévinas's reconfiguration of the ethical encounter, whereby the presence of the other—regardless of their ability to reciprocate or respond—is a sufficient and inescapable call to responsibility.

This reframing becomes crucial when considering individuals with congenital disabilities as compared to those with acquired impairments such as traumatic brain injury (TBI), as might be the case in a car accident or stroke. The latter case often elicits societal empathy through the lens of loss, mourning a formerly 'normative' life. In contrast, those with congenital disabilities are more likely to be positioned outside normative frameworks of personhood altogether. Kittay challenges this marginalisation by arguing that dependence and vulnerability are not exceptions but foundational aspects of human life. Echoing Lévinas, she asserts that the moral self is constituted not through independence or anticipating reciprocity but through our entanglement within a social matrix, particularly with those who cannot respond in kind. Both Kittay and Lévinas advocate for a radical ethical stance in which moral consideration flows not from sameness or recognition but from the sheer presence of the other in their irreducible difference and vulnerability. Consequently, how we interpret and respond to bodily differences, particularly the ecclesial body, highlights the extent to which asymmetry becomes an essential theological category when engaging a hermeneutic of disability.

Summary

As we move on to the next section to further develop this hermeneutic, we return once again to the centrality of limits in reconfiguring an understanding of the implications of asymmetry within Creamer's model. Rather than seeking to standardise or assimilate differences, a hermeneutic of disability should call for the ethical obligation to care for the other without the demand for reciprocity or mutuality. Allowing for this unqualified presence of difference challenges conventional models of growth and inclusion and instead

encourages a more radical, asymmetrical approach to ecclesiology grounded in an ethics of care.

Despite being well-intentioned in its aims to address decline, we can see how the RR programme exhibits theological tendencies that mirror the logic of Docetism, an aversion to bodily limitation (the need for growth), and an overemphasis on externalised vitality (flourishing). By foregrounding perspectives from disability theology and phenomenological philosophy, we have seen how decline, limitation, and difference are not aberrations to be overcome but vital aspects of ecclesial life that reveal the cruciform nature of Christian identity and the church. The insights of Leder, Reynolds, Eiesland, Lévinas, and Kittay draw us towards a more ethically attentive and theologically robust ecclesiology—one that embraces asymmetry, affirms the irreducible presence of the other, and resists the instrumentalisation of growth in the life of the church. By emphasising lived bodily experience, intersubjectivity, and the ethical dimensions of difference, we can also see how Lévinas provides us with a critical phenomenological lens through which to interrogate any docetic tendencies implicit within the RR programme and other growth-orientated initiatives. This approach calls for a theological framework that fully acknowledges the significance of disability and embodied vulnerability rather than relegating them to the periphery of doctrinal concerns. If the church is indeed called to be the body of Christ, then it must reckon with the full implications of that body: wounded, vulnerable, dependent, and yet glorified—not in spite of these marks, but through them.

To imagine a church beyond docetic abstraction is to imagine a community marked not by perfection or strategic success, compounded by numerical interest, but by a radical hospitality that welcomes embodied difference. In this way, the church does not simply bear witness to Christ's resurrection as the victory over death but to the incarnation as divine solidarity with the frailty of the flesh. Through this recognition of woundedness as revelatory, of vulnerability as theological, the church might truly be renewed and reformed

not through numerical growth alone but through an authentic responsibility to the needs of the other, whatever they may be. It is to this mode of authenticity that we now turn.

Disability as a hermeneutic: *Authenticity and the body of Christ*

We are allowed to talk about our disabled bodies only if and when we have managed to make them appear like “normal” ones.³⁶⁵

Frances Ryan

Introduction

To this point, we have been exploring how a hermeneutic of disability interrogates a Christian theology of the body. This has revealed the extent to which acceptance of bodily difference impacts the comprehension of alterity as a necessary interpretative lens for the church as the body of Christ. By approaching ecclesiology in this way, it soon becomes evident that a growth-orientated vision obscures the possibilities of recognising and receiving difference as a necessary and constituent part of the whole body of Christ. If the Pauline vision is to remain true, that the body is indeed made of many members (1 Cor 12), a more generous understanding necessitates a hermeneutic of disability to expose any tendency towards reductive models that universalise the body through contributive (or productive) worth, restoring the value of all members. Such a hermeneutic would not only challenge the contemporary Western turn towards the organising logic of managerialism but also invite a critical engagement with the cultural narratives that shape and sustain them in the first place.

To explore this further, we will first turn to Charles Taylor and his concept of authenticity as developed in *A Secular Age* to interrogate the social imaginary—the tacit

³⁶⁵ Frances Ryan, “Disabled Women are Making Waves Like Never Before,” *The Guardian*, 9 April 2025, G2: Life and Arts, 6.

constellation of assumptions, practices, and normative vision—driving much of contemporary church growth initiatives. As we will see, the social imaginary underpinning church growth not only reflects but sustains a theological vision in which success is equated with the market values of expansion and efficiency, frequently at odds with those bodies and forms of difference unintelligible to such metrics. It is precisely in this convergence that a hermeneutic of disability, orientated towards an ecclesiological alterity, functions as a critical lens to assess growth-centric assumptions and recover a more capacious vision of the church as a body constituted by and through difference.

However, this is not to say that this is simply a case of adjudicating between biblical texts more succinctly in search of narratives that are more supportive of positive portrayals of disability and difference. As Thomas Reynolds observes, there are tensions of contradiction that necessitate a dialogical approach capable of creating space for differing voices in tension. He notes: ‘A theological hermeneutic of disability involves a careful juxtaposition of texts which are themselves polyphonic and at times contradictory, so as to negotiate theologically between them and discern possible roots of fruitful analysis’.³⁶⁶ As such, a hermeneutic of disability requires more than referencing isolated or selective biblical texts; it demands a more holistic, critical, and discerning engagement with scripture as well as marginalised voices.

As we have seen in Chapter Three, the interpretation (or selective use) of biblical texts can become ambiguous or opaque in accounts of disability through what might be described as problematic portrayals of bodily differences. That does not mean these passages should be ignored or dismissed (based on contemporary values and beliefs), but that instead, the hermeneutic task is to selectively emphasise themes that align with broader theological narratives, ethical relations, and the contemporary imagination. This approach fosters a

³⁶⁶ Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, 35.

more faithful yet critical distance from harmful interpretations, while also resisting socially constructed readings. Engaging with disability as a lens for ecclesiology in this way challenges assumptions about normative models of the church, opening new insights into what growth, contribution, and flourishing might mean for the parish community.

However, as a preliminary step, this constructive approach requires a critical deconstruction of prevailing stereotypes that construe disability primarily as a deficit in autonomy and self-actualisation. It is within this context that Taylor's account of *authenticity* will serve as a guiding analytical framework throughout this section. Further to this, Emmanuel Lévinas's conception of 'the Other'—not as a category to be managed, but as an enduring ethical demand—will be brought into dialogue with Judith Butler's reflections on the notion of a precarious life. By engaging these three perspectives in concert, this section aims to illuminate the theological and ethical dimensions of a disability hermeneutic capable of mounting a sustained critique of growth-orientated ecclesiological paradigms.

In search of authenticity

In *A Secular Age*, Taylor undertakes an extended inquiry into the transformation of Western society from a context in which religious belief was virtually unchallenged and ubiquitously integrated within public and private life, to 'one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others'.³⁶⁷ As such, Taylor contends that secularisation is not merely the decline of religious adherence (a loss of faith), but rather the result of a radical reconfiguration of 'the conditions of belief' that marks a significant change to the social imaginary through which people make sense of their world.³⁶⁸ Taylor maps the

³⁶⁷ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 3.

³⁶⁸ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 3.

topography and terrain of this imaginary by charting the rise of secularisation from its religious origins within the late medieval era through a long and complex evolution towards the mid to late twentieth century, characterised as the ‘secular age’.

In charting this religious decline, Taylor employs the term *ancien régime*, denoting the pre-modern socio-religious order of Europe, particularly prior to the Enlightenment and the advent of Modernity. This era was marked by a pervasive and largely unquestioned convergence of religious belief with the structures of political authority and everyday social life. Within this hegemonic framework, religious identity was not a matter of personal deliberation or individual choice, but rather an inherited and socially embedded reality. Belief functioned as a shared, collective orientation, seamlessly woven into the fabric of communal existence and institutional power. Taylor contrasts the *ancien régime* with subsequent epochs (framed as types) to narrate the societal evolution from the type he calls the ‘Age of Mobilisation’ (located roughly from the eighteenth to early-twentieth century) towards the ‘Age of Authenticity’ (from the mid-twentieth century onwards). Throughout this period, religious belief becomes increasingly dislocated from traditional structures and familial ties, emerging as a matter of individual conviction rather than societal convention.

During the age of mobilisation, traditional, inherited forms of religion and social belonging, where belief was largely taken for granted, were increasingly replaced by more deliberate, conscious affiliations. Taylor notes the idea of denomination belonging to the ‘Age of Mobilization’, given that in his view ‘It is not a divinely established body (though in another sense, the broader “church” may be seen as such), but something that we have to create—not just at our whim, but to fulfil the plan of God.’³⁶⁹ As such, denominations (rather than the church itself) are human structures of organisation and control.

³⁶⁹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 450.

Accordingly, faith and identity became matters of personal choice and collective action, rather than passive acceptance.

Through this era of mobilisation, institutions, including churches, had to actively organise and maintain support, which in turn led to a more dynamic, competitive, and pluralistic landscape of belief. Accordingly, during this period of *mobilisation*, belief moves from being unquestioned and communal to becoming entirely optional and contested. Through this rise of scepticism, belief finally emerges as an entirely interior and private feature of the modern Western social imaginary during the age of *authenticity*.

The reality of how authenticity is promoted and sustained within the life of the contemporary church is significant in the shaping of theological proclivities and perspectives of growth initiatives within the CofE. To this end, we can see how the *ancien régime* (as an enchanted cosmos) highlights a starkly contrasting worldview to the positivism operative within the organising logic of the CofE's *Renewal and Reform* programme. This paradigmatic reorientation of belief—from a collectively inherited framework to a locus of individually curated expression—provides the conceptual groundwork for a more critical engagement with Taylor's articulation of authenticity, particularly as it informs contemporary reconceptions of ecclesial identity and the strategic imperatives of mission within the contemporary church.

Authenticity and the body of Christ

Taylor highlights that the contemporary ethic of authenticity is propagated by a 'new social imaginary of expressive individualism' sustained by therapies and advertising, which encourage individuals to "do your own thing" and to "just be yourself".³⁷⁰ Critical to this self-expression is the ability to make choices whereby 'bare choice as a prime value,

³⁷⁰ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 486.

irrespective of what it is a choice between, or in what domain' becomes the central tenet of the authentic self.³⁷¹ In this way, being able to choose becomes an extension of self-expression, coherent with personal convictions and beliefs, capable of eschewing coerced conformity to any social, political, or institutional frameworks and expectations. Within this scheme, Taylor highlights the extent to which the societal turn towards the individual in Western culture during the mid to late twentieth century led to what he terms the 'right of choice'.³⁷² Under these conditions, choice becomes more than a selection between options, but the very foundation of what it means to be free and, by extension, human. As a prime example of how this takes place, Taylor draws our attention to the way in which the church, through its various denominations, furthers this choice of self-expressed freedom. Accordingly, in the age of authenticity, choosing a church becomes less a matter of seeking communal ties through familial formation and cultural commitments, and more about the pursuit of a personal spirituality that serves as an extension of self-actualised values. As Taylor surmises:

The religious life or practice that I become part of must not only be my choice, but it must speak to me, it must make sense in terms of my spiritual development as I understand this. This takes us farther. The choice of denomination was understood to take place within a fixed cadre, say that of the apostles' creed, the faith of the broader "church". Within this framework of belief, I choose the church in which I feel most comfortable. But if the focus is going now to be on my spiritual path, thus on what insights come to me in the subtler languages that I find meaningful, then maintaining this or any other framework becomes increasingly difficult.³⁷³

The extent to which choice serves to sustain what Taylor refers to as a 'culture of authenticity' is thus dependent on the degree to which the church can offer individuals the opportunity for self-actualisation, rather than participation in what may be perceived as externally imposed ideas or authorities. What matters most is that beliefs and practices align with an individual's inner convictions and emotional resonance, rather than fitting into a prescribed tradition or institution. Under these conditions, propositional statements and

³⁷¹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 478.

³⁷² Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 486.

³⁷³ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 486.

programmes that offer the option of a personal ‘spiritual path’ (finding your true self, through a ‘God of your own’) act as the signifier of agency and participation that reifies God’s will through personal choice.³⁷⁴ After all, the thinking goes, Jesus came to proclaim (individualised) freedom. Within this logic, the authentic church must therefore aim to resonate, ‘speaking’ (in a Taylorian sense) personally to the spiritual proclivities of its individual members. When viewed in this way, it becomes clear as to why evangelism and growth have become coterminous with the language of ‘mission’ as proffered within the literature of the *Renewal and Reform* programme.³⁷⁵

This evolving notion of authenticity, as Taylor describes, disrupts traditional ecclesial frameworks by privileging personal resonance and individualised spiritual interests over that of inherited communal worship. The emphasis on autonomy, where legitimacy is derived from the perceived integrity of a personalised spiritual path, rather than shared creed, creates an inherently unstable relationship with traditional Anglican polity. This paradigm shift has significant implications for how identity and belonging are thus negotiated within ecclesial communities, especially for those whose bodies, experiences, or expressions fall outside normative expectations. It sets the stage for a broader critique of how contemporary culture, including the perpetual pursuit of growth, often privileges an idealised, disembodied notion of the self, rendering invisible or problematic those whose embodiment resists such ideals. Or to put it another way, the cultural turn towards (personal) authenticity, while liberating in some respects, also risks marginalising or precluding those who do not (or cannot) conform to the cultural aesthetic or performative norms.

The opening comment from Frances Ryan, a British journalist, author, and disability rights activist, helps to focus our attention on the current and contemporary nature of this

³⁷⁴ For more on this concept, see: Ulrich Beck, *A God of One's Own: Religion's Capacity for Peace and Potential for Violence* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010).

³⁷⁵ Archbishops' Council, *SGPF*, 3.

dilemma that has become all too familiar for those with bodily differences. Ryan goes on to observe that ‘the lesson for disabled women comes early and it comes often: the problem is not how society is built—the problem is your body’.³⁷⁶ Ryan’s experience of normative societal expectations invites a broader examination of how authenticity itself is construed and constructed within cultural frameworks—an inquiry that Taylor undertakes in his analysis of the moral and spiritual dimensions of the self in modernity. In his assessment, Taylor frames *authenticity* as a particular moral ideal loaded with religious and cultural values, but he also identifies the way in which it has been manipulated and deformed in contemporary Western culture.

Authenticity is often simplified to a mode of self-expression, individualism, or the rejection of cultural traditions in pursuit of personal happiness, self-improvement, and the actualisation of the self. In other words, you are free and truly yourself when *you* are in control, echoing much of the positivism foundational to the organising logic of managerialism explored in Chapter Two. This is why bodily difference becomes so problematic, as it seems to represent a loss or limitation of personal liberty. In this way, the disabled body represents a restriction to the ‘authentic self’. In seeking to develop a hermeneutic of disability, this tension offers a valuable lens through which to critique church growth models, which make a similar break with tradition in search of newer modes of instrumental individualism and ecclesial self-improvement. Accordingly, when the church, as the body of Christ, becomes primarily focused on institutional growth, strategic expansion, and numerical success, it risks an ironic *inauthenticity*—an existence defined by external validation (numerical metrics) rather than internal coherence with its Christological identity. Taylor warns against this instrumentalisation of authenticity, where the pursuit of self-realisation becomes detached from horizons of significance—those broader moral and

³⁷⁶ Ryan, “Disabled Women are Making Waves Like Never Before,” 7.

spiritual frameworks that give weight to our choices. For the church, this horizon is Christ crucified and risen, and the life of discipleship and worship that flows from participation in that mystery.

A growth-driven ecclesiology—especially one shaped by the organisational language of managerialism, leadership pipelines, and resource optimisation—may, therefore, risk the deformation of authenticity that Taylor cautions. Instead of being formed by the slow, communal, and often difficult work of discerning Christ’s presence in weakness, devotion, and local particularity, the Church of England may implicitly adopt an ‘expressive individualism’ at a centralised level: striving to project vitality and relevance at the cost of theological depth and pastoral care.³⁷⁷ Furthermore, Taylor emphasises that true authenticity is not self-disclosed but requires a dialogical engagement with tradition, community, and transcendent meaning. The body of Christ, as a theological image, assumes precisely this kind of dialogical interdependence: one body, many members, each with distinct gifts, needs, and vocation. In this light, ecclesial growth must be judged not only by scale or measurability, but by the degree to which it can sustain relationships of difference, care, and sacrificial love. A church that marginalises the ‘less visible’ members—whether ageing rural parishes, ‘non-strategic’ congregations, or communities unable to sustain growth initiatives—therefore risks becoming *inauthentic* by Taylor’s standard, failing to honour the full body of Christ. Through this tension, the docetic tendency implicit within the RR programme reveals itself once again.

The intersection of Taylor’s account of *secular time* with the organisational rationality underpinning the Church of England’s RR programme also reveals a deeper and perhaps unintended complicity in the logic of secular modernity. Much like the potential ‘dismembering’ of the church, Taylor highlights the way in which ‘time as an instrument,

³⁷⁷ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 299.

or as a resource to be managed, and hence measured, cut up, regulated.³⁷⁸ This echoes the idea of ‘empty time’ that Hans Reinders contends as the detrimental inclination towards purposive action that necessitates time must be ‘filled’ or ‘used’ for human endeavour to find meaning.³⁷⁹ What lies at the heart of this and Taylor’s critique is the transformation of temporality itself: the eclipse of *kairotic* time—time as sacramentally inflected and open to divine irruption—by the ascendant ‘tyranny’ of the clock face governing secular time, as characterised by homogeneity, linearity, and instrumentality. This shift constitutes more than a temporal reordering; it signals a fundamental reconstitution of the church’s self-understanding, increasingly mediated through the idioms of efficiency, growth, and measurability.

Martyn Percy offers a parallel ecclesiological critique of this epistemological turn. In his sustained engagement with the organisational logic of managerialism, operative within the contemporary Western church, Percy argues that the church risks compromising its theological identity by adopting corporate paradigms drawn from secular organisational theory, stating:

Growth can easily be confused with multiplication. The church is not a body that is supposed to be ever-more productive, like a factory or industry that simply improves its output year on year. It is an organic body of wisdom, in which pruning, seasons, life and death course through its very veins.³⁸⁰

Further to this, Percy contends that such a trajectory reflects a capitulation to instrumental rationality, whereby ecclesiastical life is ‘consumed by shallower mission and management targets’ and performance indicators rather than faithfulness to the Gospel or the cultivation of spiritual depth.³⁸¹ This critique directly resonates with Taylor’s diagnosis

³⁷⁸ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 714.

³⁷⁹ Hans S. Reinders, “Watch the Lilies of the Field: Theological Reflections on Profound Disability and Time,” in *The Paradox of Disability: Responses to Jean Vanier and L’Arche Communities from Theology and the Sciences*, ed. Hans S. Reinders (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2010), 156.

³⁸⁰ Percy, *The Ecclesial Canopy*, 20.

³⁸¹ Percy, *The Future Shapes of Anglicanism*, 38.

of the immanent frame, within which transcendence is no longer a structuring presence, but at best an optional belief within an otherwise closed system of causality and meaning. However, Percy's concern is not the pragmatic inefficacy of such models, but their theological incoherence. The church, he contends, is not a corporation but a sacramental body, whose time is not governed by market logics or strategic foresight, but by the liturgical rhythms of divine grace. In highlighting the tensions between the church, designated as an organisation to be managed, versus the institution to be led, Percy notes that returning to the Apostle Paul's analogy of the body is reparatory for an ecclesiology grounded in relationality and context. He writes:

[T]o contemplate the church as a body is to invite reflection on the sensitivity of the church, its receptivity, its boundaries, barriers, and definitions, all its complex processes of exchange, as well as its natural death and replenishment. It is 'osmotic' in character: giving and receiving nourishment, identity and love. The body is inescapably part of its environment, as well as separate and distinct. The body—with all its members—is incarnate in space and time.³⁸²

In light of Percy's assessment, the transposition of secular managerial models into ecclesial contexts thus constitutes a form of temporal and theological colonisation, wherein the rich texture of ecclesial temporality—formed through habits of worship and simple service—becomes flattened into the predictive timelines and audit cultures of late-modern governance.

This temporality emerges from the broader shift towards what Taylor denotes as *the immanent frame*—a construal of the world as self-sufficient and disenchanted, no longer mediated by or open to transcendent realities.³⁸³ Within this framework, time is conceived not as porous to the divine or punctuated by sacred irruptions, but as homogeneous, empty, and sequential—a neutral continuum indifferent to higher ontological orders. Contemporary growth models implicitly assume this same sequence by subjecting the

³⁸² Martyn Percy, *Anglicanism: Confidence, Commitment and Communion*, Ashgate Contemporary Ecclesiology, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013; repr., 2016), 201.

³⁸³ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 542.

church to strategies within the immanent frame as buffered, managerial, and future-orientated (in secular terms), yet increasingly evacuated of a substantive eschatological horizon. Through this process, the pastoral and prophetic dimensions of the church risk unknowingly becoming subordinate to technocratic concerns, such that vocation is reduced to leadership development, and mission to institutional survival. For both Taylor and Percy, this represents a significant ontological diminishment—a turn away from the church as a site of divine encounter towards the church as an organisational entity, whose legitimacy derives from strategic relevance rather than spiritual authority. From this, we can see that if the church is to be authentically the body of Christ in the world, it should resist becoming a project of self-marketing or institutional self-preservation. Instead, it must recover the deep, dialogical identity of a community called into being by God’s grace, sustained by love, and shaped by the crucified and risen disabled Christ.

Authenticity and the disabled body

As noted in the previous chapter section, the tension introduced by Nancy Eiesland’s vision of the resurrected body of Christ being disabled not only reshapes Christological imagination but has profound implications for ecclesiology. When considered alongside Taylor’s ethic of authenticity and applied to contemporary church growth methodologies, this concept holds the potential to reshape how we understand the church’s relationship to difference, embodiment, and limitation. Therefore, if growth-orientated ecclesiology is to be critiqued or shaped by a hermeneutic of disability, it must first recognise the challenges an ethic of *authenticity* raises for bodily limitation within a greater expectation and hope. To explore this idea further, we turn again to the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, specifically his engagement with *anosognosia*—the neurological condition causing individuals to become unaware of their own impairments or bodily limitations—that raises questions about autonomy, authenticity, and the nature of care.

Merleau-Ponty uses anosognosia not simply as a clinical descriptor but as a philosophical lens to expose the interdependency of body and world, self and other, and the often-hidden dimensions of our perceptual and existential finitude and natural limits. In applying this concept to a growth-driven ecclesiology—as promoted by the RR programme—the church can be read as analogically performing with a form of ‘spiritual anosognosia’, unable to recognise or value its own impairment or limitations. In turn, by privileging growth and strategic methodology, the CofE risks constructing an image of itself that disavows vulnerability and limitation, in much the same way an anosognosic patient cannot acknowledge the paralysis or dismemberment of a limb (‘phantom limb’ syndrome). It should be noted, however, that this is not a deliberate or conscious act. The patient is not choosing to ignore or deny limitation but cognitively cannot accept that the loss even exists. What makes anosognosia rich for ecclesiological comparison is the extent to which the church, as the body of Christ, can be damaged, or missing members (limbs), that would frame the body called ‘church’ more disabled than normative images of the ‘beach fit’ body heralded by modern standards of beauty and bodily perfection noted in the previous chapter. This body anosognosia constitutes not only a failure of perception but a rupture in relationality: an ecclesiology that cannot perceive those parts the Apostle Paul calls ‘weaker’, ‘less honourable’, or ‘unrepresentable’ (1 Cor 12.22-23). In this way, much like Lévinas, Merleau-Ponty’s emphasis on alterity becomes particularly salient. According to Merleau-Ponty, the self is always constituted through an encounter with the *other*—the body is not a self-contained object but a lived, expressive site of encounter with the world and with others. When the church neglects or marginalises those parts that do not conform to its idealised vision of success (declining parishes, ageing congregations, or ecclesial ‘outliers’), it not only suppresses this alterity but also obscures its identity as a body constituted in and through difference.

As noted above, Taylor's concern with authenticity is similarly dialogical—requiring openness to horizons of significance beyond the self—mirroring Merleau-Ponty's insistence on the embodied, intersubjective nature of meaning. He surmises that a body cannot be accounted for without reference to context, or what he refers to as the 'double horizon', comprised of both bodily and external space, stating that 'the "body schema" is, in the end, a manner of expressing that my body is in and toward the world.'³⁸⁴ This being 'in and toward the world' is the recognition that some concrete realities and experiences remain unintelligible to the proposition of models, maps, and strategies.

In relation to the church, this returns us to Nicholas Healy's critique of model-based ecclesiologies (noted in Chapter 1.3) for their tendency to function as normative 'blueprints' abstracted from the church's lived reality. As Healy states, 'all ecclesiological judgements are made within an ecclesiological context, and all should serve the church's work within that context.'³⁸⁵ In response to the contemporary trend to narrate the church in idealised and normative terms, Healy proposes that 'something like a theodramatic horizon is the most fruitful horizon within which to reflect upon the church's concrete identity within ever-shifting ecclesiological contexts'.³⁸⁶ In this way, a theodramatic ecclesiology demands attentiveness to the concrete, often ambiguous realities of ecclesial life, resisting the imposition of normative models. Theology, in this mode, is thus not prescriptive but constructive, seeking to interpret the church's witness within the broader narrative of God's redemptive action in history.

This rejection of the abstract and disembodied experience is also sustained by Merleau-Ponty, who maintains that bodily experience of space is not an isolated, purely subjective phenomenon, but is inherently situated within and made intelligible by a shared, objective

³⁸⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 130.

³⁸⁵ Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life*, 52.

³⁸⁶ Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life*, 76.

spatial framework. As he states, ‘the body’s spatiality has no meaning of its own distinct from objective spatiality’.³⁸⁷ The body does not construct its own private spatial domain detached from the external world; rather, its movements, orientation, and perceptual engagements acquire meaning only in relation to a pre-existing, publicly accessible spatiality. In this sense, the lived spatiality of the body and the measurable spatiality of the world are not identical, but are inseparably intertwined—each presupposing the other for the constitution of meaningful experience. As Merleau-Ponty clarifies, ‘far from my body being for me merely a fragment of space, there would be for me no such thing as space if I did not have a body.’³⁸⁸

A hermeneutic of disability brings this into sharper theological focus by highlighting how disabled bodies—frequently rendered invisible or marginal within growth-orientated models—embody alternative modes of spatial presence and relationality. Such embodiments challenge normative assumptions about participation, mobility, and productivity, inviting the church to reimagine spatial belonging not in terms of efficiency or scale, but through attentiveness to the diverse ways in which bodies inhabit, experience, and constitute sacred space. Furthermore, by drawing attention to the relational and *intercorporeal* nature of place—the bodily experience of interaction with the other in time and space—the intersection between Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology and a hermeneutic of disability resists the instrumentalisation of the church as a vessel to be filled or expanded. Rather, they compel a fresh ecclesial vision of the church as a site of ethical encounter, where growth is measured not by numerical increase, but by the depth of care, mutual recognition, and the dignity afforded to *every* body. Within such a framework, the church is called to allow bodily difference to reconfigure the very meaning of space, participation, and ecclesial flourishing.

³⁸⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 131.

³⁸⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 132.

From this, we can see that both Healy and Merleau-Ponty resist the modern illusion of autonomy as a form of self-actualisation. Accordingly, a church defined through self-directed growth strategies may, therefore, undermine the possibility of an authentic ecclesial asymmetry necessary to receive the other, failing to listen to or include the voices of those who do not 'perform' within prescribed reciprocal terms. This would not only be a pastoral failure but a phenomenological one as the church becomes dysregulated from its own perceptual field, constructing itself as whole when it is, in fact, dismembered.

Moreover, Merleau-Ponty's challenge to the social construction of impairment and limitation invites a theological reconsideration of how ecclesial weakness is understood. If disability is not simply framed as a deficit (medical model) but as a product of relational and social norms, then numerical decline should not be read primarily as a failure of faithfulness to God's will. From this perspective, the CofE's inability to recognise its own woundedness reflects not actual dysfunction, but a lack of theological perception, one that results from inhabiting cultural narratives of *authenticity* rather than cruciformity. In this way, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of embodiment helps to expose the harm of ecclesiological models that eschew dependency or marginalise difference in search of numerical growth.

Precarious life and the body of Christ

Building on Charles Taylor's account of authenticity as a moral ideal grounded in dialogical identity and sustained by horizons of significance, we may further enrich the critique of growth-centred ecclesiology by engaging the ethical insights of Emmanuel Lévinas and Judith Butler on alterity and the nature of precarious life.

Judith Butler's account of precarity further destabilises the autonomous subject. In *Precarious Life*, Butler argues that human lives are always constituted by their vulnerability

to the other—through exposure, interdependence, and the need for bodily recognition.³⁸⁹ In contrast to the self-actualisation characteristic of the age of authenticity, Butler contends that the human body is not a private possession but, rather, a politically saturated and as a ‘social phenomenon: it is exposed to others, vulnerable by definition’.³⁹⁰ From this perspective, those who do not conform to normative ideals of bodily integrity or autonomy, particularly disabled bodies, are often rendered socially unintelligible and excluded from the epistemological frame of ‘grievable’ lives.³⁹¹ Butler contends this exclusion is due to the fact that certain lives are rendered as being grievable, while others are excluded from the sphere of ethical concern. This same asymmetry challenges ecclesiologies that fail to make intelligible the precarity of churches the RR programme implicitly frames as being ‘unviable’ within its literature and discourse.

Taken together, Butler sharpens Taylor’s account of authenticity by emphasising the extent to which recognition is not just interpersonal but political. As highlighted by Cynthia Stark and Martha Nussbaum in Chapter Two, those lives marked by severe disability are frequently denied the social and moral conditions necessary for the construction of citizenship and equal identity. On Butler’s account, authenticity, therefore, is not merely a personal ethic, but rather a political struggle to extend the frames of recognition to those whose bodies challenge normative ideals of coherence and independence.

Butler develops these insights into a broader political and social critique through the concept of *precarious life*. For Butler, all lives are inherently precarious—not simply those marked by marginalisation or violence, but the human condition itself is one of interdependence and exposure. Further to this, it is instructive that Butler turns to Lévinas’s ethic of radical alterity that begins not with autonomy but with *heteronomy*: the self is called

³⁸⁹ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Justice* (London: Verso, 2020), 19–25.

³⁹⁰ Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2016), 33.

³⁹¹ Butler, *Frames of War*, 13–15.

into being by the face of the Other, whose silent, insistent presence constitutes an infinite ethical demand. She notes: ‘to respond to the face, to understand its meaning, means to be awake to what is precarious in another life or, rather, the precariousness of life itself.’³⁹² This call cannot be managed, measured, or instrumentalised and resists systematisation, running counter to ecclesial models predicated on efficiency, growth metrics, or strategic deployment of resources. In Lévinasian terms, the face of the Other is not an obstacle to ecclesial success but the very site of divine interruption—a revelation of the transcendent in the fragile.

When the church aligns itself with structures that ignore or obscure precarity—whether through market-driven language, managerial rationality, or narratives of growth—it risks reproducing precisely the cultural logic that Butler critiques. Such a church may fail to recognise the wounds within its own body, privileging members and communities whose strength and visibility align with institutional objectives, while neglecting those whose lives witness more closely to the cross: the grieving, the poor, the ageing, and those marginalised through bodily difference and orientation.

In this context, authenticity—understood through Taylor’s moral ontology—requires not merely being true to oneself, but being faithful to the Other whose presence is constitutive of the self. The church, then, fails to be authentic when it seeks ‘cultural relevance’ or celebrates growth at the expense of its marginal members. Conversely, it becomes truly authentic when it begins opening itself to the ethical weight of precarity—when it recognises that the body of Christ is a broken body, a body disabled, marked by wounds that are not liabilities but signs of participation in the life of Christ.

This challenges ecclesiologies that measure ‘success’ in terms of numerical expansion, finances, or growth. In a Taylorian sense, such an ecclesiology has succumbed to the deformation of authenticity: it has detached from its theological horizon—Christ

³⁹² Butler, *Prekarious Life*, 134.

crucified—and turned towards the self-validating logics of success. A Lévinasian-Butlerian corrective would, therefore, demand that the church turn its gaze instead towards the precarious: not as an object of ministry, a magnanimous gesture, or *noblesse oblige* (charitable intervention), but as the theological heart of its identity. Butler's insistence that precarity is both a condition and a call thus invites the church to reconceive growth not as a mode of survival, but as deepening relational entanglement. To grow as the body of Christ is not to acquiesce to the immanent frame of numerical success, but to become attuned to the mutual vulnerability that defines human life and divine grace. This implies a liturgical and ethical imagination rooted not in performance, but in presence, where the church lingers with the wounded, listens to the unheard, and allows itself to be transformed by the fragile lives too easily overlooked or pitied in sorrow.

In this light, the authentic church is not a successful organisation but a faithful communion—one that embodies both Taylor's dialogical identity and Butler's ethics of vulnerability. It is a community that refuses to sideline its members considered as being less efficient, recognising limitation is not failure but sacramental, and perceiving faithfulness not by growth statistics but by the depth of its solidarity with the precarious.

Conclusion

To understand why decline is a problem for the Church of England, beyond the economic mantra of 'bigger is better', we have traced the need for some recognition of the social and cultural drivers that expose the church to an ideology of growth, causally linking God's will to the prosperity and managerial logic of the institutional church. Through an intricate bricolage of Taylor, Merleau-Ponty, Butler, Creamer, and Lévinas, we can see a revised theology of authenticity starting to emerge—one that is fundamentally embodied, interdependent, and relationally faithful, moving beyond self-actualisation.

The question a hermeneutic of disability begins to raise is whether any programme of growth can be viewed as a primary act of God's divine love and providence, or susceptible to the logic of secular narratives and goals. By tracing Taylor's typology of authenticity, as the guiding principle of our contemporary context, we can see the extent to which growth actually functions as a metric of 'expressivist dispensation' within the secular age, characterised by personal choice and the demands of consumer culture.³⁹³ In other words, growth can become an ideology through which the church performs a role as the loosest of affinity groups and the vendor of spiritual services and goods. As Taylor surmises, 'The injunction to worship in the church of your choice is an injunction to belong to the "church" in this broader sense, the limits of permitted choice defining its boundaries.'³⁹⁴ As such, through the 'logic of the expressivist response', the church thus becomes increasingly disconnected from the wider social imaginary, given that 'the spiritual as such is no longer intrinsically related to society' but rather to self-actualisation.³⁹⁵ This reframing carries profound implications for ecclesiology and pastoral care.

The limits of the body, far from negating authenticity, become its very foundation. The severely disabled do not challenge our definition of personhood; they reveal its depth. Authenticity, in this vision, is then not the assertion of self over and against limitation, but the faithful living of one's life within those limits, in communion with others and before God. Under these conditions, the church is not most truly itself when it grows or performs, but when it becomes a community of mutual recognition through radical alterity, and patience through care—a place where the most fragile members are not hidden but honoured, and where the limits of the body are received not as failures, but as sites of divine encounter. From this, we can see how the RR programme exemplifies the church's

³⁹³ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 487.

³⁹⁴ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 450.

³⁹⁵ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 490.

entanglement with secular temporality, as diagnosed by Taylor, and the bureaucratic ecclesiology critiqued by Percy. Both invite a reimagining of the church's temporal and ecclesiological horizons—away from managerialism and towards a renewed participation in sacred time, wherein the church is once again attuned to the unpredictable, grace-filled interruptions within God's kairotic time.

This theological recalibration prepares the ground for a more rigorous interrogation of ecclesial identity through the lens of disability. If corporeal limitation is not a deficit but a site of theological depth and relational authenticity, then the church, as the body of Christ, needs to be reframed beyond normative constructions of ability, coherence, and productivity. Accordingly, the next chapter explores an ecclesiology of disability, wherein the criteria for ecclesial growth are redefined—not in terms of numbers or organisational logic, but through the cultivation of a theologically enriched account of bodily difference. Central to this inquiry is an ontology of care, which positions care not as ancillary but as constitutive of the church's being. In recovering care as a fundamental mode of ecclesial life, this vision offers a critical and constructive challenge to the Church of England's self-understanding, reimagining the church not as a mechanism of delivery, governance, or growth, but as a community formed by, and for, the mutual bearing of one another through God's economy of grace.

CHAPTER 5.

The body broken: *Exploring an ecclesiology of disability*

Power made perfect: *The polity of bodily contentment*

‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.’ So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.

2 Corinthians 12.9

Introduction

The central concern of this thesis has been to lay the groundwork for an ecclesiology framed through the lens of disability. At its heart lies an engagement with the Pauline image of the body of Christ, attending to how this metaphor is realised in the concrete life of the local parish church, situated within the cross-pressures of market-driven logic and strategies for growth. From this foundation, and mindful of the risk of overextension, this thesis has considered the wider theological implications of the body image, envisioning the church not as a normatively perfected body, but as a disabled body—one whose limitation and vulnerability constitute the very conditions through which growth and decline become intelligible.

This final chapter advances a critical reimagining of ecclesial identity and praxis through the lens of disability theology and the ethics of care, culminating in what I term the ‘polity of bodily contentment’. Understood as a theological antithesis, contentment in this sense serves as a counter-narrative—a reparatory approach to market-driven growth—insofar as it embodies a fundamentally different logic of desire, identity, and purpose. This polity stands as a counter-narrative to the prevailing frameworks of church growth, which have come to dominate contemporary ecclesial imaginaries. These frameworks, largely indebted to neoliberal market logics, have implicitly propagated normative ideals of the

body, inadvertently rendering the disabled body as either marginal or invisible within an operative ecclesiology. This is the ‘neutral’ position of growth. Yet church growth strategies are rarely neutral. Beneath their pragmatic appeal lies a web of assumptions about what constitutes a flourishing church, who counts, and how vitality is measured. This critique is further sharpened through engagement with feminist ethics of care—particularly the work of Eva Feder Kittay, noted in the previous chapter—which exposes how ecclesial and political imaginaries grounded in autonomy and productivity systematically obscure relations of dependency and the labour of care upon which both society and church depend. In recent decades, particularly within the Church of England, such strategies have increasingly adopted the language of corporate management rather than theological discernment. Embedded within this logic is a deeper bias: a subtle but pervasive privileging of certain bodies, capacities, and contributions over others.

To begin, this section interrogates how dominant growth models, especially those typified by the Church of England’s *Renewal and Reform* (RR) programme, risk entrenching what may be termed an ‘ecclesial ableism’—a structuring logic that marginalises disabled, elderly, and otherwise non-normative bodies by conflating ecclesial vitality with productivity and performative capacity. Through engagement with RR programme documents, theological critique, and disability discourse, this section argues that church growth strategies often obscure the theological significance of bodily weakness and interdependence, thereby compromising the church’s vocation to be a community shaped by the cross rather than the market.

Church growth and ecclesial ‘ableism’

Contemporary models of church growth are not only shaped by managerial logic—they are, arguably, structurally ‘ableist’. Their emphasis on scalability, efficiency, and measurable impact privileges certain forms of embodiment, agency, and contribution, while

marginalising those that do not conform to normative standards of health, independence, or productivity. It is in this light that the 2003 committee meeting of the World Council of churches ‘interim statement’, written collectively by people with physical impairments and caregivers of those labelled ‘disabled’, states that ‘responding to and fully including people with disabilities is not an option for the churches of Christ. It is the church’s defining characteristic.’³⁹⁶ Intended as both a theological rebuke and a prophetic corrective, the committee concluded that whilst progress was being made, no one should be excluded from the church based on bodily difference, asserting that the church as it should be is ‘A church of All and for All’.³⁹⁷ Similarly, as Frances Mackenney-Jeffs argues, the presence of disabled persons is, therefore, not an optional matter of inclusion but integral to the church’s identity and integrity.³⁹⁸ This assertion calls into question any model of church life or growth that tacitly—whether implicitly or explicitly—privileges normative bodies and marginalises those who do not conform to culturally idealised conceptions of functionality, autonomy, or productivity.

However, as we have seen thus far, the dominant models of church growth, especially as developed through mid-to-late-twentieth-century missiological paradigms, prioritise scalability, institutional interests, and measurable outcomes. Rooted in sociological metrics and often informed by corporate management strategies, this mechanistic model tends to equate ecclesial vitality with numerical success, operational efficiency, and cultural relevance. Such assumptions subtly, but pervasively, produce an ecclesial logic of ableism: valuing the body according to perceived utility, productivity, and alignment with normative standards of health, aesthetics and contributive worth (echoing much of the medical model of disability).

³⁹⁶ Central Committee, *A Church of All and for All: An Interim Statement*, World Council of Churches (Geneva: WCC, 2003), 16–17. para. 87

³⁹⁷ Committee, *A Church of All and for All*, 17. para. 89

³⁹⁸ Mackenney-Jeffs, *Reconceptualising Disability for the Contemporary Church*, 136.

As we have seen throughout, this positivist logic is particularly evident in the Church of England's *Renewal and Reform* (RR) programme. Having launched in 2015 as a comprehensive strategy to address numerical decline and secure long-term sustainability, the initial report *Setting God's People Free* (SGPF) set out a clear path of action towards these aims. This report is key to understanding the RR programme agenda and states its two-fold aims most explicitly. As follows:

This report identifies the need for two shifts in culture and practice that we see as critical to the flourishing of the church and the evangelisation of the nation.

1. Until, together, ordained and lay, we form and equip lay people to follow Jesus confidently in every sphere of life in ways that demonstrate the Gospel we will never set God's people free to evangelise the nation.
2. Until laity and clergy are convinced, based on their baptismal mutuality, that they are equal in worth and status, complementary in gifting and vocation, mutually accountable in discipleship, and equal partners in mission, we will never form Christian communities that can evangelise the nation.³⁹⁹

It is interesting to note the extent to which polemic phrasing such as 'we will never set God's people free' and 'we will never form Christian communities that can evangelise' articulate pointed critiques of Anglican polity when it begins drifting towards institutional self-preservation and managerial control. While Anglican governance typically balances episcopal oversight with synodical participation, within conciliar thought, it can become obstructive when dominated by clericalism, procedural inertia, or performance metrics. These critiques expose a polity that risks distorting the church's prophetic vocation.

As Paul Avis observes, where episcopal structures cease to serve spiritual formation and communal witness, this undermines the very telos of Anglican ecclesiology: to nurture a Spirit-led people capable of embodying and proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ.⁴⁰⁰ Accordingly, the SGPF report is explicit in eschewing any functional or managerial

³⁹⁹ Archbishops' Council, *SGPF*, 2.

⁴⁰⁰ Paul Avis, *The Identity of Anglicanism: Essentials of Anglican Ecclesiology* (London: Bloomsbury, 2008), 67–69.

interests, insisting that ‘our aim is that all should be able to respond to the saving work of God in Jesus Christ and rejoice to the full in following the [*sic*] vocation and using the gifts he has given them.’⁴⁰¹ This two-fold approach, framed as the need for greater missional focus and the betterment of relations between clergy and laity, thus concludes:

[W]hat needs to be addressed is not a particular theological or ecclesiastical issue but the church’s overall culture. This is a culture that over-emphasises the distinction between sacred and secular and therefore fails to communicate the all-encompassing scope of the whole-life good news and to pursue the core calling of every church community and every follower of Jesus—to make whole-life maturing disciples. We will not raise up cadres of godly leaders unless we create communities of whole-life disciples.⁴⁰²

Throughout, the report is clear in its diagnosis that the numerical decline in the Church of England is linked to a culture orientated around a secular-sacred divide. However, as highlighted in the previous chapter, this analysis fails to comprehend what Charles Taylor observes as the cultural conditions that render secular narratives so pervasive and internalised that the church itself often becomes complicit in their logic of causality and meaning. The need to self-actualise, driven by the innate expression of authentic individualism, creates a context for the church to performatively inspire an operant faith. As Taylor surmises:

My spiritual path has to respect those of others; it must abide by the harm principle. With this restriction, one’s path can range through those which require some community to live out, even national communities or would-be state churches, but it can also range beyond to those which require only the loosest of affinity groups, or just some servicing agency, like a source of advice and literature.⁴⁰³

As a result of these implicit pressures (or what Taylor refers to as ‘cross-polemics’), the organising logic of the RR programme appears to develop leadership and mission intentions according to perceived cultural interests (and pressures) rather than a transcendent vision of the church as a prophetic witness to the kingdom of God. To this end, whilst the SGPF report may frame itself in terms of the spiritual *Renewal and Reform* of organisational

⁴⁰¹ Archbishops’ Council, *SGPF*, 2.

⁴⁰² Archbishops’ Council, *SGPF*, 2.

⁴⁰³ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 489–90.

structures, it goes on to explicitly frame the next steps within implicitly pragmatic and managerialist assumptions.

More broadly, documentation associated with the RR programme emphasises the need for ‘influencing leadership’, ‘Pilot Dioceses’, ‘resource allocation’, and the measurement of ‘effective mission’. This language illustrates the extent to which New Public Management discourse, shaped by positivist rationalities, influences the managerialist instincts earlier decried in the opening section of the same SGPF report.⁴⁰⁴ Such internal dissonance is not unusual in growth-orientated strategies. As Lyndon Shakespeare observes, responses to church decline typically fall into one of two approaches. One he terms ‘technique-orientated’, the other ‘demographic and sociological’, both of which he regards as fundamental to the intentions of ‘the most effective and sustainable mode for a growing and thriving church’.⁴⁰⁵ Yet, as he contends:

Christians need to employ caution before accepting too quickly programs and approaches that stipulate a successful way forward through the adoption of methodologies and practices oriented to particular goals that may, under analysis, prove to be at odds with the goals of the church. As such, how the church responds under declining conditions warrants a conceptual analysis of precisely how sustainability is imagined, and what assumptions are “taken on” in the process.⁴⁰⁶

The rationalities governing sustainability are central to growth imperatives that prioritise numerical growth, institutional viability, and youth-targeted evangelism over practices of mutual care and inclusive community.

In practice, the RR programme has intensified the privileging of certain kinds of ecclesial bodies—namely, those deemed young, energetic, and entrepreneurial—while marginalising others. As we have seen in Chapter Three, the RR programme frames ageing bodies and those requiring sustained pastoral attention as a burden on limited resources

⁴⁰⁴ Archbishops’ Council, *SGPF*, 2.

⁴⁰⁵ Shakespeare, *Being the Body of Christ*, 36.

⁴⁰⁶ Shakespeare, *Being the Body of Christ*, 37.

rather than as integral to the church's identity.⁴⁰⁷ Accordingly, if ageing is a strain, then disability follows suit. As such, the RR programme's technocratic posture tends to obscure the slower, less visible forms of ecclesial life that emerge from communities shaped by vulnerability and care. In this sense, the *Renewal and Reform* programme exemplifies a broader ecclesial trend in which the theology of the body is subordinated to managerial logic, where ecclesial life is increasingly measured by productivity (growth) rather than presence.

This logic of ableism extends to the very structuring of ecclesial life around metrics of vitality that presume normative standards of physical capacity, economic productivity, and social adaptability, thereby excluding those whose lives do not conform to such ideals. In privileging growth-oriented indicators and entrepreneurial acumen, the RR programme reflects—and indeed participates in—a broader social imaginary shaped by what was noted in the previous chapter as Charles Taylor's *immanent frame*, through which meaning, identity, and purpose are construed within closed systems of human agency and instrumental reason.⁴⁰⁸ Within this immanent frame, the church's distinctiveness as a holy people, called out and sustained by divine action, becomes increasingly conflated with neo-liberal market interests. As a result, the church is inadvertently redescribed in terms borrowed from organisational theory and market metrics, such that its practices are no longer evaluated according to theological norms but by their perceived efficiency, scalability, and appeal to target demographics.

Taylor's work helps to clarify how such developments are not merely peripheral adaptations but signal a deeper recalibration of ecclesial imagination altogether. What was once understood theologically—as the Spirit-constituted communion of saints—is now

⁴⁰⁷ Voas and Watt, *Numerical Change in Church Attendance*, 60.

⁴⁰⁸ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 542.

managed as a networked enterprise embedded in the same socio-economic logics as secular institutions. Consequently, ecclesial identity becomes coextensive with cultural expectations of performance, visibility, and relevance, thus eroding the church's capacity to act as a prophetic witness to a countervailing vision of life together. In this light, the RR programme's mechanisms of resourcing and church planting function not simply as tools for mission, but as instantiations of a market-driven rationality that unknowingly reconfigure the church in the image of late capitalist values. Such dynamics expose how the logic of markets—centred on metrics, success, and strategic aggregation—risks reducing ecclesial life to a sociological event, obscuring the theological distinctiveness of the church as the gathered body of Christ.

Brian Brock and Bernd Wannenwetsch offer a nuanced account of this altered configuration of gathering through their theological exposition of 1 Corinthians 11, where the apostle Paul rebukes the burgeoning church for their disharmony in worship: 'Now in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. For, to begin with, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you; and to some extent I believe it.'⁴⁰⁹ From this admonition, they highlight the need to distinguish between the mere sociological phenomenon of congregating and the ecclesial reality of *being* the church.⁴¹⁰ Brock and Wannenwetsch note that Paul's opening declaration, 'I do not commend you', not only introduces the discussion of Eucharistic disruption but also signals a fundamental ecclesiological concern: namely, that their coming together is not configured as it should be. At the heart of Paul's critique lies the polyvalent term *synerchesthai* ('to come together'), which functions both as a descriptor of sociological assembly and, by the late first century, as an emergent technical term within Christian liturgical discourse, denoting Eucharistic

⁴⁰⁹ 1 Corinthians 11.17–18

⁴¹⁰ Brock and Wannenwetsch, *The Therapy of the Christian Body*, Vol. 2, 49.

worship. Brock and Wannenwetsch argue that Paul is intentionally exploiting this lexical ambiguity to interrogate the character of the Corinthian gathering. The crucial theological question, therefore, is not whether the people gather, but what *kind* of gathering they enact: is it a true Eucharistic assembly that embodies the body of Christ, or a pseudo-ecclesial event that fundamentally distorts that reality?⁴¹¹

This distinction is sharpened by the prepositional phrase *en ekklēsia* ('in church'), which Brock and Wannenwetsch contend should not be construed spatially, as if referring to a physical building, but theologically, as a participatory mode of being within the eschatologically and sacramentally constituted body of Christ. The preposition 'en', when read theologically rather than topographically (given the lack of church buildings in the early church), invites a reading in which Paul is not describing a neutral act of gathering *as* the church, but rather challenging whether their conduct reflects real participation *in* the church as the body of Christ.

The implication of Paul's language, then, is that ecclesial identity is not constituted by the mere act of congregating but by the discernment of the body—a theme that emerges more fully in the subsequent verses. Brock and Wannenwetsch emphasise that, despite the external markers of Eucharistic celebration, the Corinthians' practice—characterised by factionalism and disregard for the communal character of the meal—amounts to a parody of ecclesial life. Their gathering, though formally resembling a Eucharistic assembly, is in fact an 'anti-teleology' of *synerchesthai*: it fails to realise the theological telos of Eucharistic communion and thus cannot be regarded as a genuine instance of church. As such, the Corinthians remain, in the striking formulation of Brock and Wannenwetsch, 'stuck in the

⁴¹¹ Brock and Wannenwetsch, *The Therapy of the Christian Body*, Vol. 2, 49.

entrance portal', never fully entering into the ecclesial reality (the body broken) that the Eucharist invites.⁴¹²

A contention of this thesis is that growth strategies such as the *Renewal and Reform* programme aggregate modes of being the church that remain in the metaphorical entrance portal. Thus, growth-orientated strategies arguably care about the church and its growth yet fail to comprehend the nature of its gathering *in* (en) the body, rather than *as* the body of Christ. Such programmes may multiply gatherings, but they risk mistaking proximity for participation in the cruciform life of the church.

What is at stake, therefore, is not simply the success or failure of church growth strategies, but how the church orders its common life. When participation is governed by assumptions of capability, contribution, and conformity, the body of Christ is subtly reordered by criteria not its own. This is when managerial and statistical models begin to function as a mode of proto-ecclesiology, determining what counts as faithful embodiment. Read in this light, Macaskill's account of 'gift' (as noted in Chapter 2.2) is instructive. He contends that within the church, 'we often form a sense of inclusion through "normal" social practices, and those same practices influence the ways in which we ascribe relative value to other Christians'.⁴¹³ Accordingly, those who do not conform to such social 'norms' are not simply marginalised but rendered unwelcome within the body itself. Yet, for Macaskill, those labelled disabled or neurodivergent are—as all people should be—not defined by their capacity to conform or contribute but are to be received as gifts in Christ. The danger, then, is not merely exclusion, but a more profound ecclesial dismembering, in which the church's common life becomes organised in ways that fail to discern the body in those through whom Christ gives himself.

⁴¹² Brock and Wannenwetsch, *The Therapy of the Christian Body*, Vol. 2, 50.

⁴¹³ Macaskill, *Autism and the Church: Bible, Theology, and Community*, 100.

Questioning an ecclesiology of ‘weakness’

If the body of Christ is to be considered disabled, then any ecclesiology that marginalises or renders disability invisible fails to discern the body rightly and remains trapped in a logic of proximity without participation. Amos Yong challenges these normative perspectives by employing what he designates a ‘physiognomic hermeneutic’, which arises from a reparatory intervention at the intersection between Pentecostal theology, disability studies, and hermeneutical theory.⁴¹⁴ Rooted in a pneumatological framework, Yong contends that Biblical interpretation is irreducibly an embodied practice and, as such, the lived experiences of disabled people become preferential as revelatory loci for theological reflection. Rejecting disembodied or normatively ableist readings of Scripture, Yong reconfigures the hermeneutical enterprise, shifting the focus from suspicion to account for how corporeality—particularly non-normative embodiment—shapes both the production and reception of theological meaning.

By invoking the term *physiognomic*—the act of judging character or personality from a person’s presenting appearance—Yong deliberately subverts its historical deployment as a tool of marginalisation, instead advancing a hermeneutic that attends to the material and aesthetic dimensions of human difference. Within this framework, disability is not interpreted as a symbol of brokenness, deviation, or sin, but rather as a locus through which the Spirit of God is discerned and disclosed. Drawing on the Pentecostal affirmation of the Spirit’s outpouring upon ‘all flesh’ (Acts 2), Yong insists that disabled bodies are therefore not merely recipients of divine grace but are necessary participants, integral to the construction of ecclesial identity and theological knowledge.

⁴¹⁴ Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*, 63.

Mackenney-Jeffs expands on this same idea in what she terms an ‘integrationist model’ of the church that sees those with physical or learning disabilities as essential to ecclesial life.⁴¹⁵ This hermeneutic destabilises normative assumptions—those grounded in able-bodied, autonomous subjectivity—and calls for a radically inclusive interpretive posture that reimagines ecclesiology, soteriology, and theological anthropology. As Yong contends:

In this framework, the Gospel accounts are less about the curing of bodies than they are about the saving power and authority of Christ and his name. The saving work of God can occur even if the curing of bodies doesn’t happen, and we would do well to assure people with disabilities that cures are not the norm by which to measure the reality of divine salvation.⁴¹⁶

Ultimately, Yong’s physiognomic hermeneutic reframes theological interpretation as a site of ethical praxis, wherein the church is summoned to embody the inclusive, liberative work of the Spirit through practices of justice, hospitality, and mutual recognition.

Yong then extends this to articulate an ecclesiology attentive to the presence, agency, and theological significance of those labelled disabled as wholly belonging to the people of God, ‘just as they are.’⁴¹⁷ Drawing on the Apostle Paul’s metaphor of the church as the body of Christ, Yong emphasises that the so-called ‘weaker’ members are not to be discarded or pitied but are in fact indispensable to the church’s integrity and identity (cf. 1 Cor. 12.22–26). For Yong, this Pauline inversion serves as a critical counterpoint to ecclesiologies shaped by the need for visible signs of strength, coherence, and productivity.

Yong critiques both the Docetic tendencies that downplay the full embodiment of Jesus, as noted in the previous chapter, and those stereotypical representations of disability that render it as symbolically being either heroic or tragic. Against such tendencies, he argues for an inclusive theological anthropology that embraces the embodied diversity of the people of God. He writes:

By extension, people with disabilities are implicit in this metaphorical discourse. Their physical or sensory impairments define their weakness, both in the sense that they are less able than others

⁴¹⁵ Mackenney-Jeffs, *Reconceptualising Disability for the Contemporary Church*, 150.

⁴¹⁶ Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*, 66.

⁴¹⁷ Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*, 67.

without disabilities, and in the sense that they are reliant in some respects on the assistance of others. At the same time, Paul's insistence that even the weakest members of the body of Christ shouldn't be despised challenges the stereotypical thinking of non-disabled people. Accordingly, an ecclesiology of weakness would resist conventional ableist marginalization of people with disabilities as weaker, less respectable, or less-than-necessary members of the church with little to contribute.⁴¹⁸

On first reading, it appears that Yong's 'ecclesiology of weakness' helps to challenge the foundational assumptions of growth-oriented strategies, destabilising the categories through which ecclesial worth is measured, prioritising presence over perfection, and vulnerability over visibility. It offers a theological grammar for ecclesial life in which disabled persons belong by recognition of their indispensability to the body's wholeness. Such a vision reframes ecclesial vitality in terms of shared fragility and relational interdependence. However, such a vision also risks reinscribing a form of diminishment by inadvertently casting those labelled 'disabled' as being primarily bearers of weakness, thus instrumentalising their presence as symbols of ecclesial dependence rather than recognising the full range of their personhood, agency, and vocation. By preferencing the theological utility of 'weakness', the implicit risk is that those contending the complexity of the label 'disabled' become sites of ecclesial meaning-making without sufficient attention to their lived particularity and voice.

To counter this, we return to Emmanuel Lévinas' ethic of *the Face* as an essential corrective. As we observed in the previous chapter, Lévinas insists that the encounter with the Other precedes and exceeds all categories, including those constructed socially, philosophically, and theologically. The asymmetry of this ethical relation resists 'totalising' interpretations: the Face interrupts our frameworks and demands a response that does not instrumentalise the Other as a worthy character or metaphor.⁴¹⁹ Applied ecclesialogically, this means refusing to see disability as an exemplar of weakness or dependency, but rather,

⁴¹⁸ Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*, 93.

⁴¹⁹ Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 199.

as Eiesland contends, encountering the disabled God as irreducible subjects who call the community into ethical attentiveness. The church, then, is not made whole by incorporating weakness as a theological motif, but by being continually decentred by the presence of the Other whose dignity cannot be collapsed into ecclesial function or merely a symbolic role.

Polity in crisis

This theological reorientation finds profound scriptural resonance in Paul's second letter to the church in Corinth, where he recounts the words of God in response to his suffering: 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.' So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me (2 Cor. 12.9). Here, Paul articulates a theo-political inversion of conventional understandings of strength and efficacy. Divine power is not manifest in the overcoming of weakness but is, paradoxically, rendered perfect within the primary act of God.

Paul's boasting in weakness subverts the triumphalist tendencies not only of ancient Roman ideology but also of contemporary market interests. His refusal to valorise strength, capacity, or narratives of domination constitutes a theological politics of anti-triumphalism. This embrace of weakness as a dwelling place for divine presence radically aligns with the polity of bodily contentment. Paul's affirmation that grace is 'sufficient' calls into question the incessant drive towards ecclesial productivity and expansion. It signals a divine economy of sufficiency in which divine presence does not require optimised conditions but reveals itself in the midst of human finitude. This critique applies pointedly to the RR programme, which frames institutional decline as a crisis demanding urgent, centralised action.⁴²⁰ Such framing echoes what Luke Bretherton describes as the logic of exceptionality that justifies

⁴²⁰Nye, "A Vision and Narrative for Renewal and Reform." 2–3.

technocratic intervention and the marginalisation of deliberative practices in the creation and management of ‘crisis’.⁴²¹

Focusing on the challenges posed by modern urbanisation, Bretherton argues that the sheer scale of housing infrastructure, cultural and religious diversity, and demographic shifts undermine shared moral frameworks, communal practices, and widely accepted evaluative criteria. The resulting disorientation affects both urban populations and those responsible for governance, complicating the ability to make judgments in the absence of any intelligible common good.

In response to this fragmentation, Bretherton highlights the role of community organising as a means of reconstructing a *sensus communis*—a shared basis for practical rationality—by drawing on the diverse traditions and customs that shape urban environments. Through the practices of grass-roots politics, a common world of meaning and action can emerge, even if partial misunderstandings and misinterpretations remain. However, political and economic elites frequently oppose such organising efforts, favouring bureaucratic, legal, and market-driven mechanisms of control that prioritise efficiency and risk management over democratic engagement. Bretherton critiques this reliance on governance through crisis, wherein structural issues such as poverty, job insecurity, and inadequate housing are persistently framed as exceptional rather than endemic to the system. To illustrate this point, he draws on Margaret Somers’ analysis of Hurricane Katrina and the extent to which systemic neglect was re-narrated as an emergency, thereby denying fundamental rights and services to marginalised communities. In response, Bretherton argues that treating ongoing social inequalities as temporary crises not only obscures their structural power but also enables a mode of governance that perpetuates instability and

⁴²¹ Luke Bretherton, *Resurrecting Democracy: Faith, Citizenship, and the Politics of a Common Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 189–91.

exclusion rather than addressing the root causes of social fragmentation and hardship. As he writes:

Framing something as an exception justifies two parallel responses. The first is the closing down of due process, proper accountability, and collective self-rule: the crisis demands immediate action rather than taking the time to formulate reasoned and collective political judgments. The second is to claim the problems are so overwhelming and so urgent that they are beyond the scope of widespread deliberation and human judgment and instead a “neutral,” top-down procedure must be found to address the crisis. This can involve leaving it all up to the market to decide or trying to find a one-size-fits-all, technocratic, administrative solution (for example, huge housing projects) that just eradicate the problem in one go. This second response displays what can be seen as the modernist prejudice: the need to abandon tradition and eviscerate rather than reform existing institutions in order to inaugurate the “new,” “the modern,” or the “progressive” solution.⁴²²

Arguably, the RR programme reflects this same narrative of crisis through its emphasis on centralised strategies, numerical metrics, and market-based rationalities. Rather than fostering slow, local, and embodied discernment among diverse communities of faith, it positions the church as a managerial apparatus to be optimised towards growth.

In contrast, a Pauline theology of weakness offers a sharp rebuke to such ecclesial technocracy, insisting instead that divine power is found not in effectiveness, but in dependency; not in speed, but in patience; not in the eradication of weakness, but in its holy habitation. The verb to ‘dwell’ (*episkēnōsē*) used in the above verse (2 Cor. 12.9) evokes the imagery of divine tabernacling—a presence that does not evacuate sites of suffering but inhabits them. In ecclesiological terms, this suggests a vision of the church not as a monument to success, but as a tent of dwelling—a precarious yet intentional gathering of limited bodies sustained by God’s grace.

If this is so, then the decisive question becomes not how the church manages crisis, but how it inhabits weakness. Such dwelling cannot be reduced to a strategy or programme; it demands a different ontology altogether. To dwell with finitude, vulnerability, and interdependence is already to enter into what we earlier described, following Nel Noddings,

⁴²² Bretherton, *Resurrecting Democracy: Faith, Citizenship, and the Politics of a Common Life*, 190.

as a relational mode of *caring-for* as an attentive, responsive posture grounded not in outcomes but in encounter. The alternative to crisis-driven optimisation is therefore not passivity, but a reorientation of ecclesial being: from acquisition to attention, from management to mutuality. It is here that the distinction between divergent modes of care becomes determinative—particularly when read in light of the feminist critique of dependency, which exposes how care itself is structured, obscured, and often subordinated within growth-oriented logics.

Caring and growth

Caring and expressions of care take different forms. How care is conveyed shapes the very nature of the one caring and who (or what) is being cared for. In a neo-liberal society, caring about growth can go one of two ways. In the first instance, it may be a concern for a desired (willed) outcome, one that contributes to the care of quantifiable and measurable results determined by a prescribed calculus. In following Fitzmaurice's earlier critique (Chapter 1.3), we might consider this an *acquisitive* form of care. In this formulation, care becomes subordinated to busyness, productivity, and economic utility, aligning with a broader capitalist logic in which the value of care is assessed through its capacity to acquire goods, optimise performance, or sustain competitive advantage. Alternatively, care can be a mode of existence and activity that shapes meaning for both the giver and receiver of care. For the caregiver, the act itself becomes a defining aspect of their identity, shaping their being in and with the world. In this way, care becomes *a priori* to their actions.

As we will explore in the final section of this chapter (5.3), for the recipient of care, the experience of being cared for—when attentive to feedback—affirms their inherent value through moments of acceptance, vulnerability, and dependence. Care in this mode is not merely functional or a task to perform, but is existential, reinforcing the dignity and worth of the other. We might therefore refer to this mode as an *ontological* form of care that resists

the commodification and instrumentalisation inherent in *acquisitive* care, instead foregrounding relationality, interdependence, and the ethical dimensions of the body, which become particularly salient when applying disability as a hermeneutic and ecclesiological lens.

Like many engaged in the philosophical work of disability, Eva Feder Kittay relates much of her experience caring for her disabled daughter, Sesha, to her analysis of dependency being contingent on justice within liberal societies. Through personal experience, Kittay observes that when society is understood as an association of equal and autonomous persons—as conceived by Rawlsian contractarian theory—this conception fails to account for the role of caregivers and, more specifically, women labouring in ‘dependency work’.⁴²³ In her book *Love’s Labor*, she develops a feminist critique of Rawls’ contractarianism that radically reconfigures an ethics of care (similar to Nussbaum’s ‘capabilities approach’ noted in Chapter 2.3) that is sufficiently cogent in responding to the lived experience of disability. Kittay refers to this encounter as the *dependency critique* that seeks to expose the extent to which the human need for care and its consequences (including the status and support of caregivers) are systematically relegated from the centrality of the public square to the periphery of the private sphere. She states:

The dependency critique is a feminist critique of equality that asserts: A conception of society viewed as an association of equals masks inevitable dependencies, those of infancy and childhood, old age, illness and disability. While we are dependent, we are not well-positioned to enter a competition for the goods of social cooperation on equal terms.⁴²⁴

Further to the disparity produced by the competition of goods, Kittay highlights how the privatisation of dependency—a feature of Rawlsian political theory—marginalises both those in need of care and those who provide it. She contends that this dynamic means that the situation of ‘those who care for dependents becomes invisible in the political domain—

⁴²³ Kittay, *Love’s Labor*, 9.

⁴²⁴ Kittay, *Love’s Labor*, x.

the domain in which parties are to be reckoned as equals.⁴²⁵ More broadly, Kittay critiques social contract theories for envisioning citizens as ‘free, equal, rationally self-interested beings’, arguing that such models fail to account for the profound dependencies and unique challenges faced by those with mental or physical impairments.⁴²⁶ Accordingly, she concludes that ‘as long as the bounds of justice are drawn within reciprocal relations among free and equal persons, dependents will continue to remain disenfranchised’.⁴²⁷ Read in this light, Kittay’s dependency critique provides a lens for understanding the needs of resource-constrained parish churches, while exposing the limits of any organising logic that measures their vitality solely by what is visible. On this account, parishes experiencing declining congregations following the loss of clergy, or facing amalgamation through rationalisation, are rendered disenfranchised—not only through the erosion of community, but through the withdrawal of the care necessary to sustain ecclesial life.

At its core, the dependency critique gestures towards an ontological responsibility for the continuation and flourishing of life. To care is to nurture being, an investment in the shared project of existence that transcends immediate needs to support the broader continuity of life. This responsibility highlights the ethical and existential dimensions of caregiving: it entails responding to others as an integral aspect of what it means to live meaningfully. Caring is thus ontological, expressing our temporal and corporeal existence, and revealing our relational nature, vulnerability, and mutual dependence. As will be explored further in Chapter 5, to care is to be human in such a way as to reveal our relational nature, vulnerability, and dependence upon one another. In this sense, caring becomes a mode of reclaiming the mystery of providence as divine will—beyond the ‘expressivist’ logic of economic exchange—by recognising that our embodied, temporal lives are always

⁴²⁵ Kittay, *Love’s Labor*, 84.

⁴²⁶ Kittay, *Love’s Labor*, 44.

⁴²⁷ Kittay, *Love’s Labor*, 85.

interwoven with those of others. To give or receive care, therefore, is to engage the very essence of being. In this way, care, as an organising logic for the church, grounds a vision of ecclesial flourishing that cannot be reduced to the metrics of growth.

From a Heideggerian perspective, care (*Sorge*) is central to human life. It is not just something we do; it is a condition of our being-in-the-world. To exist as a human being (*Da-sein*), therefore, becomes an epistemological claim to exist in care—a mode of accommodation to the needs, possibilities, and vulnerabilities of oneself and the other. As Heidegger surmises, ‘care is the fundamental constitution of *Da-sein*’ and is therefore existentially *a priori*.⁴²⁸ This alternative moral epistemology thus rejects the theoretical idea of materiality found within logical-positivist claims. Instead, from a theological perspective, care is not just an ethical obligation or a moral choice but a constitutive aspect of human and ecclesial life. As such, any reparatory approach to ecclesiology must not begin with abstract ideals of growth, efficiency, or optimisation, but from the ontological priority of care itself—attending to the concrete, relational, and dependent conditions through which the church is sustained as the body of Christ.

Furthermore, as the fundamental dimension of *Dasein*, care signifies an intrinsic being-toward-the-world that encapsulates the way *Dasein* is always and already engaged with its own existence, future possibilities, and the world it inhabits. Through *Sorge*, Heidegger argues *Dasein* is not a detached ‘observer’ but a being whose existence is always shaped by concern, responsibility, and an orientation towards its own finitude. Caregiving, in this sense, arises naturally from the relational nature of our existence, or what Heidegger terms our *being-with* others (*Mitd-sein*). We are inherently connected, and caregiving is one of the ways that we manifest and honour that connection. As Heidegger surmises:

Since being-in-the-world is essentially care, being-together-with things at hand could be taken in our previous analyses as *taking care* of them, being with the *Mitda-sein* of others encountered within the world as *concern*. Being-together-with is taking care of things, because as a mode of

⁴²⁸ Heidegger, *BT*, 249.

being in it is determined by its fundamental structure, care. Care not only characterizes existentiality, abstracted from facticity and falling prey but encompasses the unity of these determinations of being.⁴²⁹

At its core, caring reflects the human condition of vulnerability and interdependence. To care for someone is, therefore, not just a practical action, a task with an outcome, but a profound acknowledgement of the other's vulnerability—a vulnerability that mirrors our own. In caregiving and care receiving, we recognise and respond to the fact that none of us exists entirely independent of others. We are born into relationships of care, and throughout our lives, we rely on the care of others to varying degrees. This interdependence is then not incidental to the church; it is central to what it means to belong and be known by God and his people (the church). In this way, caregiving also draws attention to the embodied and temporal nature of our existence. The physical acts of care—feeding, comforting, aiding—are rooted in the material reality of our bodies, emphasising the lived, tangible aspects of our being-in-the-world, and at the same time, caregiving unfolds over time, creating a relationship between the past, present, and future. This temporal dimension underscores the continuity and transformation of life, whereby care, whether given or received, is not passive but active and evolves alongside—and in response to—the needs and circumstances of all involved. For Heidegger, this makes our being and becoming a continually evolving and active process of participation in the world-as-it-is, which he contrasts with the idea of being orientated 'toward possibilities' derived from extrinsically imposed notions, abstract options, and superficial aspirations concerned with positivist claims of what could be. He states:

Being toward possibilities then shows itself for the most part as mere *wishing*. In the wish, Dasein projects its being toward possibilities which not only remain ungrasped in taking care of things, but whose fulfillment is not even thought about and expected. On the contrary, the predominance of being-ahead-of-itself in the mode of mere wishing brings with it a lack of understanding of factual possibilities. Being-in-the-world whose world is primarily projected as a wish-world has lost itself utterly in what is available, but in such a way that in the light of what is wished for, what is available (all the things at hand) is never enough. Wishing is an existential

⁴²⁹ Heidegger, *BT*, 193.

modification of understanding self-projection which, having fallen prey to thrownness, solely *bankers after possibilities*.⁴³⁰

When applied to the life of the church, Heidegger's distinction between authentic care and the existential modification of 'wishing' reveals a fundamental incompatibility between the language of growth in an acquisitive form and the ontology of care. Models of church growth making positivist claims about strategic acquisition thus function within the logic of what Heidegger describes as a 'wish-world' where being is directed toward endless possibilities without an authentic engagement with the grounded realities of the church. In this 'wish' mode, the pursuit of growth becomes an unchecked projection—one that, rather than fostering meaningful relationality or attending to the concrete needs of the faith community, is driven by the orientation (or 'vision' as it is often spoken of in church growth circles) towards what is always beyond. An example of this claim can be seen in the *Resourcing the Future* (RTF) plan that identifies streamlined funding mechanisms to sustain the RR programme in reconfiguring the growing church:

The RTF changes will help support dioceses in their mission and growth plans, and provide fuel for the wider *Renewal and Reform* programme. The national church funds only represent a relatively small part of total church expenditure. All the same, they can help in the process of renewing the church for the 21st century and beyond, such that it will be a growing church in every region and for every generation, open to everyone in England, building up the Body of Christ through committed disciples, and working for the common good.⁴³¹

Whilst this growth is framed within a 'preferred future' for the church (a mode of 'wishing'), Heidegger would caution that such a stance ultimately results in a lack of understanding, as it fails to grasp the *facticity* (the evolving reality) of the here-and-now and instead falls into a mode of existence that prioritises what *could* be acquired over what *must* be authentically cared for.

In contrast, Heidegger would assert that true care does not reduce its object to a means for expansion but remains grounded in *Dasein's* being-with-others, recognising the inherent

⁴³⁰ Heidegger, *BT*, 195.

⁴³¹ General Synod, *Resourcing the Future: Implementation Plans*, 4.

relationality and responsibility that defines human existence (and, by extension, for our context, the church). Insofar as the acquisitive stance of church growth methodologies and organising logic remains preoccupied with a future-oriented desire for more—whether in terms of membership, influence, or resources—it risks forsaking the essential nature of care, which requires presence, attentiveness, and an openness to the givenness of the Spirit of God rather than an endless deferral towards *wish* fulfilment. Essentially, continually ‘throwing the dice’ or designing new ways to ‘cut the cloth’ will not bring the care the church needs to sustain growth. Thus, rather than approaching growth through a lens of strategic acquisition and competitive expansion, the church must instead cultivate an understanding of care not driven by scarcity but through the posture of receptivity—acknowledging divine grace as the foundation of its existence whilst also reconsidering human agency in light of a more relational and generative vision.

The polity of bodily contentment

In contrast to crisis, a polity of bodily contentment begins to emerge from this dwelling as an ecclesial ethic. Contentment, as deployed here, should not be confused with complacency or passivity. Rather, it designates a radical theological disposition: the willingness to dwell with bodies as they are, in their brokenness, dependence, and unpredictability, without appeal to transformation as a prerequisite for inclusion. As such, contentment may be understood as a theological antithesis to market-driven growth, insofar as it embodies a fundamentally different logic of desire, identity, and purpose. Market rationalities are premised upon the continual production of lack; they depend on dissatisfaction as the engine of expansion, privileging novelty, optimisation, and the pursuit of ever-increasing returns. Within such a framework, growth is not oriented towards sufficiency or fulfilment but is an end in itself—perpetual, self-justifying, and resistant to limits.

By contrast, contentment signifies a disposition of receptivity and restraint. It is not synonymous with complacency but rather reflects a cultivated trust in divine provision and a refusal of scarcity-driven striving. Theologically, it resists the commodification of ecclesial life by refusing to equate vitality with productivity or numerical expansion. In this sense, contentment challenges the metrics by which churches are often assessed in growth paradigms—metrics that prioritise visibility, efficiency, and instrumental value over fidelity, presence, and mutual belonging. This divergence is particularly acute when ecclesial identity becomes entangled with performative relevance and institutional success.

Market-driven frameworks tend to reduce churches through what John Milbank terms ‘the barbarism of instrumentalizing reason’, giving rise to ecclesial ‘brands’, whereby leaders become entrepreneurs, and congregants, consumers with increasingly privatised interests.⁴³² Contentment, however, reorients ecclesial purpose towards the slow, often hidden work of formation, hospitality, and witness. It enables the church to inhabit a posture of humility rather than competition, and to resist the anxieties that drive conformity to secular standards of viability. While growth and contentment are not inherently incompatible, their underlying logics must be carefully distinguished. Growth that emerges organically from faithfulness to the Gospel may well be consistent with contentment. However, when growth is pursued according to market logics, contentment does not merely offer an alternative posture—it functions as a critical, and perhaps prophetic, form of resistance. As Milbank would assert, the Church of England is well-positioned for sustaining local life as the grounded reality, ‘where many different peoples possessing many different gifts collaborate in order to produce a divine–human community in one specific location.’⁴³³

⁴³² John Milbank, “Stale Expressions: The Management-Shaped Church,” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 21, no. 1 (2008): 128.

⁴³³ Milbank, “Stale Expressions,” 124.

Such a localised polity calls for a fundamental reordering of broader ecclesial priorities, whereby faithfulness supersedes effectiveness; presence takes precedence over performance; and mutuality replaces managerialism. Leadership within this polity is no longer defined by charisma or efficiency but by the capacity to receive and sustain relational vulnerability. Liturgy becomes less a curated experience and more a shared inhabitation of sacred time, punctuated by interruption, slowness, and the grace of precarious participation. The Eucharist, in this framework, is not a performance of ecclesial unity premised on uniformity, but a liturgical affirmation of grace amid fracture. The table becomes a site where all bodies—trembling, wounded, aching—are welcomed, not despite their limits, but through them. It is here that the polity of bodily contentment most clearly resists the liturgical aestheticism and technocratic precision of church growth cultures.

Summary

This section has offered a constructive theological response to dominant models of church growth by tracing a polity of bodily contentment. In doing so, it has drawn together the threads of this thesis: the claim that disability is not simply an ethical or pastoral concern for the church, but a critical theological lens through which ecclesial identity, imagination, and practice may be reconfigured. Central to this reconfiguration has been the retrieval of care as a theological and political category. Drawing on feminist critiques of dependency, particularly those of Eva Feder Kittay, this section has shown how ecclesial life—much like liberal society more broadly—has often been structured around ideals of autonomy, productivity, and independence that obscure the constitutive role of dependency and the labour of care. Where growth-orientated ecclesiologies are shaped by prevailing neoliberal market assumptions—privileging autonomy, productivity, and strategic agency—this section has argued, through the lens of care ethics, that such frameworks fail to account for the relational and dependent conditions that sustain ecclesial life. Instead, it has proposed

an ecclesiology that embraces the spectrum of decline, limitation, and growth as sites of theological meaning rather than binary signs of institutional failure or so-called ‘success’.

The polity of bodily contentment articulates a reparative ecclesiology, grounded not in idealised visions of health or wholeness, but in the fragile, complex realities of the concrete and local church. Drawing on Amos Yong’s physiognomic hermeneutic, we have seen how dominant theological frameworks risk marginalising or instrumentalising disabled bodies—treating them either as objects of pastoral care or as metaphors for ecclesial weakness. In contrast, the interpretive significance of disability challenges ecclesial imaginaries that privilege autonomy, independence, and strength. This move reframes the church as a body whose integrity is not compromised by weakness but constituted through it—a body where those considered ‘weaker’ are not merely included but indispensable. In this light, this section has argued for an ecclesiology that refuses to reduce disabled persons to signs of vulnerability or spiritual insight.

Together, these claims culminate in the polity of bodily contentment—a theological posture that refuses the anxious drive for growth, success, and optimisation. Contentment here does not imply complacency or passivity, but a deliberate resistance to the logic of constant improvement and expansion, grounded instead in the recognition of dependency, vulnerability, and mutual care as constitutive of the church’s life. In this way, the polity of bodily contentment names not simply an alternative strategy for the church, but a reordering of its very life: one in which growth is no longer the measure of faithfulness, but the by-product of a community willing to dwell, patiently and attentively, within the limits of embodied existence. The following chapter section develops this reordering by attending to care not merely as an ethical practice, but as the condition under which a renewed ecclesial horizon comes into view.

Redefining growth: *Measuring differently through an ontology of care*

Introduction

We now return to the earlier discussion in Chapter Two concerning the ontology of care—an account of human existence and ecclesial being that challenges dominant anthropologies premised on independence, competence, and self-sufficiency. Within ecclesiological discourse, such an ontology calls into question prevailing assumptions about the church as a site of strategic mobilisation, instrumental labour, or self-actualisation. Instead, an ontology of care invites a reconfiguration of the church as a place of shared limits, mutual sustenance, and embodied patience. The temporality of care—its slowness, its openness to interruption, and its resistance to linear productivity—offers a layered theological critique of the accelerated and programmatic temporality often valorised in church growth paradigms. In this way, care is not reducible to emotional sentiment or functional response but is revealed as the theological locus of presence: a way of being *en ekklesia* (as noted in the previous section) that requires proximity, vulnerability, and participation within the body of Christ.

Accordingly, this section builds upon these insights by interrogating the Church of England's growth strategies through the lens of care ethics, drawing particularly on the work of Joan Tronto. It argues that growth-orientated ecclesiology is structured by a deficit model of vitality, wherein slowness, fragility, or decline are treated as pathologies to be corrected. Such frameworks risk perpetuating what could be considered a form of 'ecclesiological eugenics' that seeks to eliminate or marginalise expressions of church life that do not conform to dominant metrics of success. In contrast, Tronto's four-phase

schema—*caring about*, *taking care of*, *care-giving*, and *care-receiving*—offers a critical lens for analysing these dynamics. Of particular theological and ethical importance is the often-overlooked final phase, *care-receiving*, which signals the moral completion of care as a relational and responsive act. It is here that the one who is cared for gives feedback, demonstrates need, or resists the form of care offered—challenging the caregiver’s assumptions and inviting an ethics of attentiveness and mutual transformation. Applied to ecclesial contexts, *care-receiving* exposes the limitations of top-down, strategically imposed models of care and authority, and calls instead for modes of leadership and community shaped by proximity, responsiveness, and shared risk.

This argument also develops the theological implications of the *polity of contentment* introduced in the previous section—a vision that resists the ecclesial adoption of scarcity-based and market-driven logics. In contrast to metrics that valorise numerical growth, managerial performance, and institutional efficiency, the *polity of contentment* frames ecclesial flourishing in terms of stability, mutual trust, and the slow cultivation of presence. When held alongside Tronto’s concept of *caring with*—a democratic mode of care that centres collective responsibility and interdependence—a fundamentally different ecclesial imaginary emerges. This model challenges the church to reimagine not only how it grows, but what it means to grow. Rather than measuring success through expansion or replication, *caring with* foregrounds the ethical and theological significance of relational depth, responsiveness to vulnerability, and the shared inhabitation of fragile and interdependent life.

Ecclesiological ‘eugenics’

At its core, caring reflects the human condition of vulnerability and interdependence. As noted previously, Emmanuel Lévinas suggests that our very being is tied to the ethical

demand placed on us by the presence of the 'Other' as radical alterity.⁴³⁴ To care for someone is not just a practical action in expectation of returns (gain), but a profound acknowledgement of the other's need or vulnerability—a vulnerability that mirrors our own. In caregiving, we recognise and respond to the fact that none of us exists as an entirely independent creature. We are born into relationships of care, and throughout our lives, we rely on the care of others in varying degrees. This interdependence is not incidental; it is central to what it means to be human.

Caring and caregiving also shape the meaning of existence for both the caregiver and the one receiving care. For the caregiver, the act of giving care often becomes a defining aspect of their identity, shaping how they engage with the world and find meaning in their existence. For the recipient, the experience of being cared for affirms their inherent value, even in moments of vulnerability or dependence. Care, in this way, is not merely functional; it is existential, reinforcing the dignity and worth of human life. Moreover, caregiving expresses an ontological responsibility for the continuation and flourishing of life. To care is to nurture being, both in oneself and in others. It is an investment in the shared project of existence, transcending the immediate needs of the moment to support the broader continuity of life. This sense of responsibility underscores the ethical and existential dimensions of caregiving, as it entails responding to the needs of others as an integral part of what it means to live a meaningful life. Caregiving also draws attention to the embodied and temporal nature of existence. The physical acts of care—feeding, comforting, aiding—are rooted in the material reality of our bodies, emphasising the lived, tangible aspects of being. At the same time, caregiving unfolds over time, creating a relationship between past, present, and future. This temporal dimension highlights the continuity and transformation of life, reminding us that care is not static but dynamic, evolving in response to the changing

⁴³⁴ Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 39.

needs and circumstances of those involved. In these ways, caring and caregiving are deeply ontological. They are not simply acts we perform; they are expressions of what it means to be human. They reveal our relational nature, our vulnerability, and our dependence on one another. They demonstrate how meaning is created through relationships, how responsibility binds us to the world, and how our embodied, temporal existence is always intertwined with the lives of others. To care is to engage with the very essence of being.

To a significant extent, strategies of church growth are underwritten by an implicit drive to identify, diagnose, and remedy perceived deficiencies within the church as the body of Christ—such as declining attendance, ageing congregations, or perceived cultural irrelevance. This logic operates through a deficit model of ecclesial life, wherein vitality is equated with growth, visibility, and predictable outcomes. In this framing, ecclesial forms that do not conform to such metrics—those marked by fragility, slowness, or dependency—are rendered problematic or even pathological.

From the perspective of an ecclesial ethic, this approach could be likened to the function of prenatal screening practices such as amniocentesis, which, while framed as offering reproductive choice, often operate within a cultural logic of eugenics—implicitly or explicitly aiming to prevent the birth of children with conditions such as Down's syndrome. Accordingly, as we have seen in Chapter Three, a vision of the 'healthy' or 'normate' body (whether human or ecclesial) becomes the standard against which other forms of life are judged and, where possible, corrected or, at worst, eliminated. Such parallels expose a troubling ecclesiological horizon: one in which the church is imagined less as the diverse and interdependent body of Christ (1 Cor. 12), and more as the optimised organisation whose worth is measured by desirable performance and growth. In this light, efforts to grow the church may not merely express a desire for faithfulness or mission, but a deeper, often implicit discomfort with ecclesial weakness, cultural irrelevance, or forms of community that resist the market logics of success. This dynamic invites a critical theological interrogation:

does the pursuit of growth inadvertently enact a form of ecclesial eugenics, eliminating what appears weak in order to achieve a more ‘perfect’ body?

An ontology of care

At some point in life, everyone, regardless of status or power, needs to be cared for. The Enlightenment ideal of autonomous subjectivity loses all traction when contemplating the needs of a newborn, end-of-life support, the sick, or, as is the focus of this thesis, the complex needs that can accompany those labelled disabled. As Selma Sevenhuijsen highlights, what is most problematic in contemporary society is the extent to which care is seen to be the loss of control, freedom, or autonomy, ‘whereby vulnerability and needs are located in the so-called “needy”, and not in “normal” moral subjects themselves.’⁴³⁵ Rejecting the societal norm of self-sufficiency, Selma asserts that an ethics of care anticipates dependency, relationality, and vulnerability as constitutive of all human existence and limitation.

Further to this view of caring, Joan Tronto, Eva Kittay, Maurice Hamington, and Stanley Hauerwas argue that it is not merely a private virtue or affective sentiment but is fundamentally a moral and political practice—one that reshapes how we understand relationality, justice, and democratic life. Rather than supplementing an existing neoliberal framework, care demands a reorientation of ethical and political thought about the realities of human interdependence and vulnerability. Central to this reframing is the recognition that care is both relational and structural: it involves not only intimate acts of support but also the social arrangements through which needs are either met or neglected. In this way, Joan Tronto defines care more broadly as:

⁴³⁵ Selma Sevenhuijsen, *Citizenship and the Ethics of Care: Feminist Considerations on Justice, Morality, and Politics*, trans. Liz Savage (London: Routledge, 2015), 28.

[S]pecies activity that includes everything we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web.⁴³⁶

She continues by highlighting the extent to which contemporary notions of care risk being restricted to human relations or romanticised within dyadic or individualistic modes (as in a mother and child). As such, Tronto resists the confinement of care to domestic or sentimental spheres, repositioning it instead within civic and institutional practices that encompass both the affective and the procedural dimensions of democratic society. In addition, she frames what constitutes care by delineating the limits of what is not care, stating: 'Among the activities of life that do not generally constitute care we would probably include the following: the pursuit of pleasure, creative activity, production, destruction. To play, to fulfill a desire, to market a new product, or to create a work of art, is not care.'⁴³⁷

Whilst Tronto acknowledges that activities such as production, play, or marketing may be aimed at care, they are also (in an Aristotelian sense) aimed at another end. It is the contention of this thesis that growth-orientated ecclesiologies operate within this realm of differing ends. Crucially, Tronto also delineates how care moves through four steps that sequentially represent an ever-deepening of bodily participation and embodiment. As she outlines:

The four elements of care are: caring about, noticing the need to care in the first place; taking care of, assuming responsibility for care; care-giving, the actual work of care that needs to be done; and care-receiving, the response of that which is cared for to the care. From these four elements of care arise four ethical elements of care: attentiveness, responsibility, competence, and responsiveness.⁴³⁸

It is evident thus far that Church of England strategies, such as the *Renewal and Reform* programme, demonstrate a distinct sense of 'caring about' (ethical attentiveness) church growth framed in the hope of faithfulness and abundance in the parish context. This

⁴³⁶ Joan C. Tronto, *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 103.

⁴³⁷ Tronto, *Moral Boundaries*, 104.

⁴³⁸ Tronto, *Moral Boundaries*, 127.

intention of growth should be both welcomed and encouraged. However, equally and conversely, the intentions of production and competition replete with the logic and language of management, distort care towards other ends—namely, the organising logic of the market. By doing so, caring about growth takes on an alternate agenda that cannot avoid the conflict inherent between the various modalities and phases of care. As Tronto highlights:

While ideally there is a smooth interconnection between caring about, taking care of, care-giving, and care-receiving, in reality there is likely to be conflict within each of these phases, and between them. Nurses may have their own ideas about patients' needs; indeed they may "care about" a patient more than the attending physician. Their job, however, does not often include correcting the physician's judgment; it is the physician who "takes care of" the patient, even if the care-giving nurse notices something that the doctor does not notice or consider significant. Often in bureaucracies those who determine how needs will be met are far away from the actual care-giving and care-receiving, and they may well not provide very good care as a result.⁴³⁹

Further to this, the disjunction between Tronto's phases of care moving from 'caring about' to the acceptance of 'care-receiving' (which all will need at some point in life) is acutely visible in the hierarchical structures of the Church of England, particularly in the role of bishops who 'are called to serve and care for the flock of Christ.'⁴⁴⁰

As episcopal overseers, bishops are, by virtue of their role, removed from the day-to-day practices of parish life—the site where the most intimate and embodied forms of ecclesial care are enacted. Their vocation, framed institutionally, is to 'take care of' the church through strategic governance, resource allocation, and the oversight of clergy within their diocese. Yet this macro-level responsibility can become disconnected from the textured realities of *care-giving* and *care-receiving* that occur in local congregations. Similar to the bureaucrats Tronto describes, bishops may shape the systems through which ecclesial needs are interpreted and addressed, yet lack the proximity or relational embeddedness required to discern those needs with accuracy and empathy. Consequently, the care they

⁴³⁹ Tronto, *Moral Boundaries*, 109.

⁴⁴⁰ Church of England, *Common Worship: Ordination Services*, Study ed. (London: Church House Publishing, 2007), 61.

offer may be well-intentioned but misaligned, shaped more by strategic imperatives than by the lived experiences of the vulnerable communities they are called to serve. Further to this, Tronto highlights the divide that typically occurs between these phases of care whereby ‘caring about, and taking care of, are the duties of the powerful. Care-giving and care-receiving are left to the less powerful.’⁴⁴¹ For the Church of England, this tension raises critical questions about the adequacy of care when it becomes abstracted from embodied relationality, and how ecclesial authority might be reimagined to better attend to the grounded realities of interdependence and need within the local parish church.

Accordingly, care ethics confronts and destabilises the ideal of the autonomous subject that underlies much of neoliberal moral theory. As noted in Chapter Two, Eva Kittay offers a critical intervention to a Rawlsian liberalism by exposing its conceptual inadequacy in addressing the moral and political significance of human dependency. Rawls’s model of justice as fairness, grounded in contractarian reciprocity among autonomous individuals, fails to accommodate the asymmetrical and interdependent relationships inherent in caregiving and dependency work. Kittay responds by proposing an expanded conception of reciprocity through the notion of *doulia*—a reconfiguration of the term *doula*, referring to those who care for caregivers.⁴⁴² This framework of ‘nested’ dependencies reframes justice not as an exchange between equals, but as a transitive moral economy in which the care extended to dependents is sustained by a broader social commitment to those who provide that care.⁴⁴³ *Doulia* thus names both a normative principle and a social imperative, calling for public institutions (among which the Church of England could be counted) that recognise caregiving as a central component of social cooperation, to ensure that individual caregivers do not disproportionately bear the burdens of dependency work. In making this

⁴⁴¹ Tronto, *Moral Boundaries*, 114.

⁴⁴² Kittay, *Love’s Labor*, 116.

⁴⁴³ Kittay, *Love’s Labor*, 73.

claim, Kittay argues that a just society must move beyond the liberal emphasis of autonomy and social contract, instead grounding its civic architecture in the ethical primacy of care. Without such a shift, political justice remains structurally incomplete, incapable of sustaining the conditions necessary for human flourishing across the full spectrum of ‘vulnerability in dependency’, particularly for those whose lives are marked by the complexities of the label disabled.⁴⁴⁴

This vision of justice is also central to ‘The Care Manifesto: The Politics of Interdependence’, written by *The Care Collective*—a multidisciplinary group seeking to address the contemporary crises of care—that states care should be repositioned as the organising principle of political, economic, and social life. Andreas Chatzidakis et al. contend that contemporary neoliberal societies are structured in ways that marginalise or actively undermine care, resulting in what they term a ‘banality of carelessness’, the normalisation of institutional neglect. Care in this sense is not merely absent but systematically misdirected, privatised, and inequitably allocated, rendering carelessness as an ordinary and depoliticised feature of organisational and bureaucratic machination.⁴⁴⁵ In response, they call for a radical reorientation of public life around the values of interdependence, mutual support, and collective responsibility by moving from the market logic of growth towards a model of ‘universal care’, whereby ‘care is placed front and centre on every scale of life’.⁴⁴⁶ Crucially, the manifesto highlights the asymmetric nature of care and resource allocation, acknowledging the unequal distribution of care work within households and across global and national economies—often relegated to women, racialised communities, and migrant labourers working under precarious conditions. Such asymmetries are not incidental but deeply embedded within a political economy that

⁴⁴⁴ Kittay, *Love’s Labor*, 121.

⁴⁴⁵ Andreas Chatzidakis et al., *The Care Manifesto: The Politics of Interdependence*, ed. The Care Collective (London: Verso, 2020), 18.

⁴⁴⁶ Chatzidakis et al., *The Care Manifesto*, 19.

prioritises efficiency, profit, and competition over relationality and real human need. In this way, the manifesto not only offers a critique of the marginalisation of care but proposes a transformative politics of interdependence. This entails reimagining institutions—state, civic, and economic—as sites for collective care, structured by participation, equity, and attentiveness to the realities of dependency and vulnerability. Yet, far from a sentimental or private virtue, care is presented as the foundation of democratic life and the precondition for social justice. To this end, the Church of England may benefit from paying heed to such a vision of care.

Further to these political and structural insights, Maurice Hamington emphasises the embodied and performative dimensions of care. Drawing from feminist phenomenology, he contends that care is not a static moral disposition but is rather a ‘way of being in the world that the habits and behaviours of our body facilitate’.⁴⁴⁷ His account attends to the micro-gestures, habits, and physical presence through which moral responsiveness is enacted, challenging ethical theories that become abstracted from lived experience. For Hamington, the moral significance of care lies in what he locates as a ‘collective intelligence’, a *phronesis* (practical wisdom) that emerges through relational engagement.⁴⁴⁸ Tronto would agree, asserting the basic nature of care that ‘requires not only nurturing relationships, but also the physical and mental work of taking care of, cleaning up after, and maintaining bodies.’⁴⁴⁹ Care is not a theory, but rather is situated in the particular and messy realities of everyday life. As such, care is more than a functional or emotional response to an abstract deficiency, but a fundamental mode of being-in-the-world—a posture of attending that sustains embodied life.

⁴⁴⁷ Maurice Hamington, *Embodied Care: Jane Addams, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Feminist Ethics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 2.

⁴⁴⁸ Hamington, *Embodied Care*, 94.

⁴⁴⁹ Joan C. Tronto, *Caring Democracy: Markets, Equality, and Justice* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 2.

Accordingly, from an ontological perspective, care can be understood as inherently transitive, insofar as it constitutes a relational movement through which beings come into existence in relation to others. As Stanley Hauerwas points out, this movement holds that significance ‘found in sharing one’s life with another person—a significance that will usually come as a surprise—cannot be found outside the activity itself.’⁴⁵⁰ Rather than existing as a self-contained attribute or emotion, care thus functions as a generative force that extends outward by structuring subjectivity, shaping social arrangements, and sustaining interdependent life. As noted in Chapter Two, Heidegger’s existential ontology of care (*Sorge*) is foundational to *Dasein*’s being-in-the-world, signalling a mode of existence that is always already attuned and concerned with its surroundings. Feminist care ethicists such as Tronto and Hamington further develop this relational ontology by positioning care as a constitutive condition of all human life, wherein the self is always situated within webs of dependency and obligation. From this perspective, care is not merely something one possesses but something one *does*, and in doing, becomes.

Measuring differently

Taken together, these accounts converge in presenting care as a practice that is at once affective, embodied, political, and structural. It is enacted through everyday relationships but is also implicated in broader systems of power, resource allocation, and social value. As such, care is not simply what we do for others but who we are and how we live with others in conditions of mutual dependency and moral obligation. This is precisely what the various diocesan schemes of the Parish Share system were intended to achieve. Yet, as highlighted in Chapter Two, the very systems set up to ‘care about’ the church (the basic recognition that care is necessary) have become mechanisms towards ‘investment focused on fulfilling

⁴⁵⁰ Stanley Hauerwas and Jean Vanier, *Living Gently in a Violent World: The Prophetic Witness of Weakness*, 89.

dioceses' strategic plans for growth' that cannot move beyond the 'taking care of' phase that calculates costs and results.⁴⁵¹

According to Tronto's definition, this phase involves 'assuming some responsibility for the identified need and determining how to respond to it.'⁴⁵² Yet, to locate care ontologically, there needs to be a move beyond finances and administrative tasks that are frequently troubled by limited resources, towards 'care-giving' that 'almost always requires that care-givers come in contact with the objects of care.'⁴⁵³ This phase shift, from 'caring-about' to 'care-giving' would reconfigure the premise of Parish Share from an organising task to one that would necessitate bishops becoming distinctly invested by knowing the names, needs, knowledge, and life of the local parish church. This is not to suggest, as the *Setting God's People Free* report does, that a reconfiguration of relations between clergy and laity is long overdue, but rather, as Martyn Percy contends, there needs to be a reparatory approach to the language of partnerships capable of fostering 'mutual *trust* between congregations and the hierarchy in the mutual support of clergy and parochial ministry'.⁴⁵⁴ This shift is what Tronto calls 'caring *with*', envisioning an ethic and politics not rooted in competition or autonomy, but in a practice of justice that is attentive to the fragile, interwoven conditions of the other in shared life. As she writes:

The goal of such practices is to ensure that all of the members of the society can live as well as possible by making the society as democratic as possible. This is the essence of "caring with." While living in a democratic manner is not the only goal of care, or of human life, in a democratic society it is the goal of democratic caring practices. Thus, democratic politics should center upon assigning responsibilities for care, and for ensuring that democratic citizens are as capable as possible of participating in this assignment of responsibilities.⁴⁵⁵

As part of a broader ethic of responsibility, this aligns care more explicitly with solidarity—beyond mutual reciprocity—as a means to both critique and sustain trust in the current

⁴⁵¹ General Synod, *Resourcing the Future*, 1, para. 4.

⁴⁵² Tronto, *Moral Boundaries*, 106.

⁴⁵³ Tronto, *Moral Boundaries*, 107.

⁴⁵⁴ Percy, *The Future Shapes of Anglicanism*, 79.

⁴⁵⁵ Tronto, *Caring Democracy*, 30.

ecclesial polity of the Church of England.⁴⁵⁶ In this way, an ontology of care reconfigures relational power from ‘caring about’ (taking interest) towards ‘caring with’ (being invested) as an essential change of episcopal posture towards the life of the flourishing (and growing) local church. This reconfigured mode of participation represents a relational shift that Percy also contends is challenging and yet possible within the current polity of the Church of England. As he states:

The idea of conceiving of a new partnership between clergy, diocese, congregations and parishes is to re-determine the value and need of ministry in any given context, and to create the conditions whereby the church could respond more adequately to changing social situations.⁴⁵⁷

However, ‘creating the conditions’ is what poses one of the greatest challenges to the possibilities of transforming the mode of ‘caring about’ growth (attentiveness), to become one of ‘caring-with’ growth (becoming vulnerable) within the ecclesial imaginaries and horizon of the Church of England.

As has been the contention of this thesis thus far, the church, in the context of contemporary culture and the political landscape, does not escape the cross pressures of market-driven logic towards success and competition. In her observations of care in the late 1970s and mid-1980s, Waerness reveals that this same pressure existed within modalities of caregiving, placing demands of performance and production in pursuit of growth. As she highlights:

Growth-oriented care is the work that is most attractive to professional groups. In the result-oriented health and social services, care-giving work is primarily a matter of therapeutic activities more specifically directed to altering the patients’/clients’ bodies or personalities in such a way that they get out of the patient/client situation and, preferably, into working life as soon as possible. The growth-oriented public services wish to ‘get rid of’ the clients with whom they do not succeed.⁴⁵⁸

The possibility that care might be used as a mechanism to ‘get rid of’ someone due to undesirable metrics signifies a fundamental distortion of care’s ontological and ethical

⁴⁵⁶ Tronto, *Caring Democracy*, 23.

⁴⁵⁷ Percy, *The Future Shapes of Anglicanism*, 84.

⁴⁵⁸ Waerness, “Caring as Women’s Work in the Welfare State,” 81.

foundations. When the inherent dignity of a care-receiver becomes subordinated to instrumental logics of optimisation, measurability, and utility, then, as Tronto noted earlier, this has become anything but care.

This reframing reflects a deeper epistemic shift in which care is reconceptualised not as an open-ended, relational, and responsive practice, but as a means to an end—governed by the imperatives of efficiency and outcome. Such instrumentalisation is rooted in the dual forces of market rationality and logical positivism that underpin much of the organising logic of managerialism, privileging what can be measured, managed, and predicted over what must be lived with, attended to, and improvised.

This logic finds a convergent expression in growth-orientated ecclesiologies that co-opt managerial strategies and outcome-based frameworks, recasting ecclesial life in terms of strategic development, numerical expansion, and goal-driven performance. As a result, both care and growth become void of their relational and theological depth, becoming instead instruments of institutional self-preservation, where success is quantified and failure is pathological. Such an approach not only marginalises the fragile, dependent, and non-productive bodies, but, from an ecclesial perspective, undermines the church's capacity to bear witness to a different mode of life—one shaped by grace, mutuality, and the irreducible particularities of embodied interdependence.

In contrast to instrumentalised models of care and growth, adopting Tronto's posture of 'caring *with*' offers ecclesiology a fundamentally different theological imaginary—one that reconfigures how success is perceived and enacted within the church. Rather than measuring growth through metrics of efficiency, replication, or strategic performance, caring *with* insists on the shared vulnerability, mutual responsibility, and embodied attentiveness that characterise life together in the body of Christ. It invites a participatory form of ecclesial life that resists the logic of disposability and recognises the theological

significance of weakness, dependency, and difference—not as deficits to be overcome, but as constitutive dimensions of communal flourishing. In this way, caring *with* does not negate the desire for growth, but reframes it as a qualitative deepening of presence, trust, and solidarity. It orients ecclesial success not around expansion or institutional survival, but around the capacity to remain with, respond to, and be transformed by the needs and gifts of the other. Within such a vision, the church does not simply manage its parishes but inhabits them; it does not merely sustain structures but sustains lives. Caring *with*, then, becomes both a critique of ecclesiological managerialism and a prophetic alternative—reasserting the church’s vocation to be a community of care marked by justice, reciprocity, and the abundant grace of God.

Summary

This chapter has argued that care ethics, and particularly Tronto’s model of care, offer a powerful theological and political critique of growth-driven ecclesiology. The prevailing strategies within the Church of England often stall within the initial phases of *caring about* or *taking care of*—marked by attentiveness and managerial procedures—but fail to embody the relational embeddedness of *care-giving* or the moral accountability of *care-receiving*. This failure is not merely administrative but theological, reflecting a deeper difficulty in dwelling with, being formed by, and responding vulnerably to the needs of ecclesial bodies that do not conform to the mould of strategic success.

By contrast, caring *with* signifies a participatory posture in which care is no longer something enacted for others at a distance, but rather a shared practice of attending to interdependence and mutual becoming. This shift reframes what counts as ecclesial success: not growth in numerical terms or institutional replication, but the cultivation of communities marked by responsiveness, solidarity, and shared fragility. In this light, caring *with* resonates deeply with the polity of contentment developed in the previous section,

which resists the extractive and performative logics of ecclesial neoliberalism in favour of a slower, more reparative vision of flourishing. Such a polity is not anti-growth, but redefines growth as the deepening of trust, presence, and participatory fidelity. It is here, in the embrace of care as both ethical imperative and theological condition, that the church may rediscover its vocation—not as a mechanism for institutional optimisation, but as a body attuned to the complex dignity of shared life in Christ.

The final section of this chapter now turns to ask what new ecclesiological possibilities might emerge were the church to take care not only more seriously, but more literally—by imagining the church itself, as the body of Christ, to be disabled. A body marked not by perfection, strength, or seamless functionality, but by limitation, interdependence, and vulnerability. Such a reimagining invites a radical reorientation of ecclesial identity, one in which disability is not a deficit to be overcome, but a constitutive dimension of what it means to be the church—limited, contingent, and yet deeply bound by the Spirit of God in the shared work of care.

Taking care seriously: *What if the church really is disabled?*

“We were being trained to be missionaries—or at least reformers—to be clever *and* to care”.⁴⁵⁹

Dame Anne Marie Rafferty

Introduction

What would it mean to say that the church, as the body of Christ, is disabled? This claim constitutes a radical theological and ethical intervention—one that challenges prevailing assumptions in both moral philosophy and ecclesiology. It subverts dominant paradigms that equate moral agency with autonomy, ecclesial health with growth, and embodied difference with deficiency. In this final section, we extend the central argument of this thesis: that when examined through the lens of disability, the church, as the body of Christ in pursuit of a normate body—imagined as fit, lean, and optimally functional—ultimately distorts and betrays the theological reality of its existence as the localised instance of the body of Christ. Rather than a perfected or self-sufficient institution, the church is more faithfully understood as a wounded, interdependent body—one marked by vulnerability, limitation, and the continual need for care bound in mutuality.

As we have seen in the previous section, this interleaving of care with ecclesiology reveals a rich source for further theological enquiry. Understood as a social, political, and theological practice, care offers a generative reconfiguration of ecclesial life beyond the metrics and imaginaries of growth-driven paradigms. In particular, it builds upon the

⁴⁵⁹ Madeleine Bunting, *Labours of Love: The Crisis of Care* (London: Granta, 2020), 122.

exploration of a *polity of bodily contentment*, a vision of the church not as a body striving for expansion, efficiency, or coherence, but as one rooted in the ethical recognition of bodily finitude, shared vulnerability, and interdependence.

Drawing on Joan Tronto's conception of *caring with* as a democratic and justice-oriented practice of care, this final chapter has argued that the church's growth is most faithfully expressed not through numerical increase or institutional resiliency, but through its capacity to care through embodied solidarity. To develop this argument, this section introduces and elaborates a theologically and ethically radical claim: that the church, as the body of Christ, *is* disabled. This is not merely a metaphorical provocation, but a substantive reorientation of ecclesiology and moral thought. It contests dominant theological imaginaries that align holiness with normative wholeness, or ecclesial vitality with strength and the metrics of numerical growth. Instead, it proposes that the authenticity of the church is found not in overcoming weakness but in embracing and inhabiting it through care-giving and care-receiving. To frame the church in this way is not to sacralise suffering or romanticise an aesthetic of vulnerability, but to resist the denial of dependency that underwrites managerial and growth-oriented ecclesiologies, and to name limitation as constitutive rather than accidental to ecclesial life. Naming the church as disabled does not idealise limitation; it simply refuses the fiction of self-sufficiency. In doing so, this chapter brings disability theology into sustained conversation with Maurice Hamington's ethics of *embodied care*, arguing that the church's life must be understood not as a project of self-sufficiency or moral authority, but as a vulnerable, interdependent body-in-need.

In framing the church as disabled, this final section returns to Nancy Eiesland's vision of the *disabled God* and Deborah Creamer's 'limits model', affirming that God's presence is not revealed in idealised forms, but in limited and wounded bodies in need of care. This approach resists tropes of pity or heroism but instead affirms the dignity of life lived within interdependence, vulnerability, and limitation as intrinsic to all human flourishing. The

church, too, is such a body: contingent, imperfect, and defined by ongoing dependencies. This reconceptualisation does not diminish the church's presence and vocation; rather, it serves to clarify. To extend Eiesland's *disabled God* to the body of Christ is to acknowledge the church as a site where God's grace is received through limitation, where care is not a patronising gesture of benevolence from the strong to the weak, but a shared and embodied reality that deepens relationships of participation.

Thus, this final section seeks to integrate the insights of disability theology and care ethics to advance an ecclesial vision of the church as a community not of achievement (growth) but of attunement to the body, to its needs, interdependence, and to the ethical demands of *caring with*. In doing so, it brings this thesis towards a renewed ecclesial horizon: an account of the church that begins not with the need to arrest decline, but with the quiet, disruptive recognition that simply *caring about* growth is not enough. What the Church of England needs is care that is far more radical. What is needed is to take care seriously. Doing so gestures towards a church that is not measured by its output or visibility, but by its capacity to dwell with limitation, that welcomes dependence, and bears witness through lives that do not conform to normative expectations. This is the 'intensive' growth that Karl Barth asserts is generative towards the 'upbuilding of the community' called church, which in turn leads to the outward, 'extensive' signs of growth.⁴⁶⁰ According to Barth, such a church is not perfected, but prophetic; not triumphant, but attentive. This is the ecclesial body this thesis has sought to imagine: a disabled body, in which the vulnerability of dependency is not a threat to be managed, but a present and ongoing reality to embrace in textured modalities of care. To begin, we turn first to an exploration of how an institutional shift from the market metrics of growth, towards the centrality of care as the organising logic of the church, might become possible.

⁴⁶⁰ Barth, *CD IV/2*, IV.2, 648.

Organising care

The etymology of the word *care* comes from Old English *caru* and Old High German *chara*, meaning sorrow, lament, or mental burden, and from Old Norse *kor*, meaning sickbed—each linking care to suffering.⁴⁶¹ Historically, care has implied a committed presence in the face of pain, involving both emotional solidarity and attentiveness to the body's limitations and needs. Care is also closely linked to *cara*, from the Old Gaelic word for cherishing (or 'beloved'). We can only cherish what we love.

It bears repeating that the Church of England cares about the growth of the church. This is an important claim beyond any ecclesial proclivities or polemical critiques of church growth initiatives such as the *Renewal and Reform* programme. However, as has been the contention of this thesis, simply *caring about* growth risks tracing the false pretensions of managerial interests and market-driven logics. As Oliver O'Donovan contends, a growth-focused mission becomes a spectre that extends beyond any earnest appeals for cultural relevance or institutional reach. He states:

Mission is not merely an urge to expand the scope and sway of the churches influence. It is to be at the disposal of the Holy Spirit and making Christ's victory known. It requires, therefore, a discernment of the working of the Spirit and of the Antichrist. These two discernments must accompany each other: to trace the outline of Christ's dawning reign on earth requires that one trace the false pretension too. One reason that the idealist language about the kingdom of God in the late nineteenth century failed to avoid the trap of civilisational legitimisation was that it never identified the false horizon, and could grasp social evil only as a regression from civilisation into barbarianism.⁴⁶²

As Luke Bretherton notes, O'Donovan's use of 'Antichrist' is the specific configuration of any force that intends 'to form a unified or total political and sacral authority opposed to or apart from Christ in the context of a political theology'.⁴⁶³ As such, the 'false horizon' O'Donovan cautions is the disruptive datum that orients and organises the church towards

⁴⁶¹ Bunting, *Labours of Love*, 38.

⁴⁶² Oliver O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 214.

⁴⁶³ Luke Bretherton, "Introduction: Oliver O'Donovan's Political Theology and the Liberal Imperative," *Political Theology* 9, no. 3 (2008): 267.

a desired ‘civilisational legitimation’ that ultimately distorts the telos of mission, namely, to proclaim the crucified and resurrected Christ authentically.

As we explored previously in Chapter 4.3, through Charles Taylor’s account of the *Age of Mobilisation*, the theological significance of O’Donovan’s warning becomes evident in the ways that order and civilisational authority are expressed through the ecclesial polity of the early nineteenth-century Protestant church, conflating the structures of social and civil order as ecclesial extensions of God’s divine design. During this period, the church sought not only to shape the moral lives of its members but also to reify God’s presence and assurance through the architecture of organisational governance, discipline, and institutional coherence. As Taylor notes:

The expressive revolution has also undermined the link between Christian faith and civilizational order. A leading feature of many of the religious forms of the Age of Mobilization described above was their strong sense of an ordered life, and their attempts to aid/persuade/pressure their members into realizing this.⁴⁶⁴

The ‘expressive revolution’ to which Taylor refers—emerging in the 1960s and characterised by the cultural prioritisation of authenticity, self-expression, and personal interiority over inherited norms of duty or institutional loyalty—effectively disrupted the church’s ability to act as a moral architect of social order. As individual subjectivity (and choice) came to eclipse traditional practices and ecclesial or institutional authority, the church’s efforts to stabilise its presence through alignment with political and bureaucratic forms of control became increasingly untenable. The consequence of this alignment, however, even prior to its destabilisation, was a reification of divine order within socio-political frameworks that risked conflating ecclesial mission with civilisational management—precisely the kind of ‘false horizon’ O’Donovan identifies. Thus, what appears as concern for growth or flourishing may, in this light, be read as an anxious appeal for control, coherence, and theological legibility within the dominant logics of state and market. In O’Donovan’s terms,

⁴⁶⁴ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 492.

the growth-orientated ecclesiology within the Church of England's *Renewal and Reform* programme is the 'false horizon' in need of recalibration.

As noted in Chapter 3.1, viewing the church through the lens of Nicholas Healy's practical-prophetic ecclesiology—thus reorienting towards a theodramatic horizon constituted through care and, more specifically, *caring with*—introduces a reparatory approach to this 'false horizon'. Counter to the claims of the *Setting God's People Free* (SGPF) report highlighted in the previous chapter—stating that what is needed for the Church of England to grow is a change of overall culture—Healy would suggest that:

Each of us is called by the spirit of Christ to our own unique roles by which we receive our particularity as persons. The church only mediates that call, co-operating in the work of the Spirit or obstructing it. Within a theodramatic horizon, one cannot say that one's salvation is proportionate to one's conformity to a particular ecclesial culture, for that culture is pre-eschatological, the product of a very mixed body that is dependent upon other bodies.⁴⁶⁵

In view of such a mixed and interdependent body, the recommendation made by the SGPF report—that what the Church of England needs to grow 'is not a particular theological or ecclesiastical issue but the church's overall culture'—is therefore an organisational over-reach.⁴⁶⁶ As noted in Chapter 3.2, this institutional over-reach exceeds its ability to grasp the desired growth, and reflects an over-realised eschatology that misaligns the theodramatic horizon of the church by calibrating ecclesiology with managerial techniques and organisational logic. The necessary interdependence of the 'very mixed body' that Healy identifies is mediated by the church revealed by the reality of dependency. Yet this interdependence also exposes a tension: whether care, when ordered institutionally, can be sustained without relational proximity.

⁴⁶⁵ Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life*, 178–79.

⁴⁶⁶ Archbishops' Council, *SGPF*, 2.

Caring by proxy

When care is mediated through institutional structures rather than embodied relationships, it risks becoming a proxy mode of care, expressed at a distance and detached from the mutual vulnerability that characterises Tronto's category of 'taking care of' noted above. As Nel Noddings observes, 'organizations can certainly address some particular needs, but they cannot care in the sense required by care ethics. Assuming that they can do so may lead to a corruption of the concept of care.'⁴⁶⁷ Accordingly, she distinguishes between *caring-about*—articulated in accordance with Tronto's definition of a distant and often abstract form of concern expressed through policy, advocacy, or charitable aid—and the act of *caring-for*, which could be likened to Tronto's notion of care-giving that entails embodied, relational engagement with another's expressed or innate needs. Yet because caring-for necessarily involves differential vulnerability and agency, it always carries the potential risk of domination (or abuse) if not critically constrained. The asymmetry intrinsic to care is therefore not merely descriptive but ethically volatile, requiring structures of accountability that resist its distortion. Whilst Noddings presents a simplified version of Tronto's four phases of care, her distinction between caring-about (institutional) and caring-for (relational) offers a clear analytical framework for assessing the Church of England's shifting power structures. Particularly, the growing tension between centralised strategies of church growth and the historic logic of the localised parish system. A creeping shift in proximity is the issue.

A symptom of this shift can be seen in much of the documentation issued through the *Renewal and Reform* programme, such as the SGPF report noted above, which reveals a deeper structural problem: the dislocation of ecclesial authority from the concrete practices of localised care. As noted in the previous chapter, the difficulty faced by many bishops is

⁴⁶⁷ Noddings, "Care Ethics and "Caring" Organizations," 72.

not merely a function of administrative overload but a theological misalignment with the possibility of Tronto's *caring with*. While episcopal vocation gestures towards a pastoral imagination, in practice it is often confined to the phase of 'caring about' and, at best, 'taking care of'—the phases of care associated with ethical attentiveness and strategic provision—while remaining largely detached from the deeper embodied practices of 'care-giving' and the mutual vulnerability of 'care-receiving.' This results in a form of leadership that risks mirroring Tronto's critique of bureaucratic systems: those with the power to define and distribute care are structurally distanced from its intimate enactment. When care becomes organised from a position of abstraction, it tends to prioritise institutional viability over the relational texture of parish life. Despite their best intentions, bishops can unintentionally lapse into what might be termed a *technocratic pastoralism*—administratively proficient, ethically sincere, yet relationally dislocated. This distancing is not simply logistical but theological, revealing a misalignment between ecclesial authority and the cruciform pattern of care modelled in the life of Christ.

Initiatives and missional missives are circulated online and emailed to parish clergy, frequently shaped by strategy consultants and diocesan development teams whose expertise lies primarily in organisational optimisation and target delivery rather than in sustained theological or ecclesiological reflection.⁴⁶⁸ Such documents often emerge from committees or consultants structured around managerial timelines and measurable outcomes, and while not necessarily devoid of theological reference, they tend to draw selectively upon scriptural or doctrinal motifs in service of strategically defined objectives. The result is a praxis increasingly configured by market-inflected rationalities—efficiency, scalability, impact metrics—that align more closely with Noddings' account of *caring-about* than with the embodied grammar of *caring-for* through communion, sacrament, and interdependence.

⁴⁶⁸ Examples of this include research by consultancies such as: Eido Research, *Five practices, one experience, and the Holy Spirit: Exploring spiritual growth amongst 18- to 35-year-olds in the UK church*, CCX (2025).

This development carries particular risks for church polity, especially in relation to the care exercised within local parish life. Where care is organised within hierarchical institutional structures without reciprocal vulnerability, the language of pastoral concern can mask coercion or enable spiritual abuse. Asymmetrical care, particularly within sacramental and episcopal authority, must therefore be subject to continual scrutiny lest it become a vehicle for control rather than communion.

Caring by proximity

In the context of the church, the call is for its leaders to be shepherds (John 10.1-18) who must not lead from behind closed doors or policy frameworks alone; they must know the sheep and be known by them. In short, senior leaders, specifically bishops, should become the *exemplars par excellence* of care, as Pope Francis exhorted in his Chrism Mass: ‘be shepherds, with the “odour of the sheep”’.⁴⁶⁹ Without this sort of proximity, bishops risk occupying a form of pastoral oversight that is structurally incapable of receiving care, and therefore, never fully offering it.

One way to account for this shift is what Noddings observes as the dilemma of all organisations that seek to enact care. She contends that while large institutions may express their interests in *caring-about* an issue or people through policies or abstracted commitments to well-being, they struggle to enact what could be deemed the act of *caring-for* such causes, which requires relational proximity, attentiveness to expressed needs, and the cultivation of mutual responsiveness. This critique builds upon Tronto’s assessment highlighted in the previous chapter (5.2) that centres on the way bureaucratic systems often conflate distant concern with genuine care, substituting managerial concern for embodied, dialogical presence. As Noddings states most explicitly:

⁴⁶⁹ Pope Francis, “Chrism Mass” (Holy Thursday, Saint Peter’s Basilica, 28 March 2013), para. 7.

In care ethics, a carer's act must be evaluated with respect to its effects on the relevant web of care, but there is no caring *relation*—no matter how hard the carer works—if there is no acknowledging response from the cared-for. This requirement is especially important when we consider the possibility of “caring” organizations.⁴⁷⁰

This evaluative distinction maps closely onto the ecclesiological reconfigurations currently taking place within the Church of England. As we noted in the previous chapter (4.2), diocesan strategies and centrally funded ‘resource churches’ frequently exemplify a form of *caring-about*, mobilising a language of mission, growth, and renewal to articulate concerns for institutional decline. Yet such strategies and language often operate remotely from the lived particularity of local contexts, and risk prescribing normative solutions without adequate attention to the communities they aim to serve. Echoing Fiona Robinson’s warning against universalist moral interventions, Noddings cautions how care abstracted in this way risks implicitly reproducing patterns of dominance and marginalisation, even when well-intentioned. This critique resonates with the Church of England’s reliance on centrally directed growth strategies such as the *Renewal and Reform* programme or, more latterly, the ‘Vision and Strategy’ initiative that seeks, amongst several bold ambitions, to create ‘ten thousand new Christian communities’.⁴⁷¹

In contrast to the positivist logic of church growth strategies, the traditional parish model more closely embodies an ethic of *caring-for*. By being rooted in place, sustained by long-term relationships, and attentive to everyday needs, parish ministry serves as a mode of *caring with* through shared practices of presence and mutual care, rather than the organising logic of managerialism. Yet these forms of ecclesial attention are increasingly undermined by centralised strategies that prioritise the efficiency and replication expressed through the posture of *caring-about* growth. The risk of this perspective is that it diminishes the potential of care to rhetoric, severed from relationality. For the church to truly care, it

⁴⁷⁰ Noddings, “Care Ethics and “Caring” Organizations,” 74.

⁴⁷¹ “Vision and Strategy,” Church of England, updated 8 June, 2025, accessed 8 June, 2025, <https://www.churchofengland.org/about/vision-and-strategy>.

must resist strategic abstractions and invest in the conditions that sustain reciprocal, embodied ecclesial life to avoid growth becoming no more than a veneer for institutional survival. Such tensions expose a more fundamental problematic at the heart of ecclesial life and care ethics: the contested status of dependency as both a theological condition and a political challenge.

The dilemma of dependency

Liberal political thought has long been structured around a valorisation of autonomy, independence, and rational self-sufficiency, casting dependency as a deficit to be overcome and relegating care to the private sphere. As Madeline Bunting notes, the idea of needing help or becoming dependent on others in liberal society has become something shameful. Facing continual pressure to deliver results, she highlights the degree to which the rise of the welfare state since the 1960s gave way to the reality whereby ‘independence became the culturally privileged goal, and its absence prompted contempt’.⁴⁷² The reframing of care has profoundly shaped the organisation of political life, where the needs associated with care and vulnerability become privatised, treated as peripheral, socially inconvenient realities in need of overcoming, or ‘fixing’. As Eva Kittay acutely observes:

If dependency is not a part of one’s daily life, it is easy and convenient to ignore it. After all, what does cleaning bedpans or comforting a teary toddler have to do with matters of state, matters of finance, or the world of culture? The answer, of course, is *everything*. Yet our own dependency and the dependency of others has been conveniently kept out-of-sight, tucked away metaphorically and literally, attended to by women.⁴⁷³

Kittay’s feminist critique highlights not only the gendered invisibility of care but the ideological mechanisms through which liberal societies disavow the moral and political centrality of dependency. This disavowal of dependency is not only a political distortion but, as Dan Hardy argues, an ecclesial one too: by imagining itself as autonomous and self-

⁴⁷² Bunting, *Labours of Love*, 210.

⁴⁷³ Kittay, *Love’s Labor*, 193.

sustaining, the church risks misunderstanding the very nature of mission, which is not a managerial project of expansion but a movement *with and for* others, for the church cannot ‘be itself without moving, both within itself and with others: it is mission-constituted.’⁴⁷⁴ In this light, the growth-oriented interests, as critiqued by O’Donovan, appear not only theologically misguided but structurally inattentive to the mutual dependencies that shape faithful witness.

The social marginalisation of need is further elaborated by Joan Tronto, who traces the extent to which neo-liberal societies offer only two modes of subjectivity: autonomy or dependence, with the latter viewed as a threat to freedom and dignity. Tronto notes that ‘dependence, implying as it does that those who care for dependents can exercise power over them, has been anathema to liberal notions of individual autonomy.’⁴⁷⁵ Consequently, liberal theory has sought to design a political order that shields the autonomous subject from the perceived indignity of needing or providing care. While this anxiety rightly recognises the risks of domination and abuse inherent in asymmetrical care relations, it misidentifies dependency itself as the problem. In doing so, it obscures the more fundamental reality of interdependence that characterises all human life.

From infancy through illness, disability, and old age, every individual will experience dependency that requires the care of others—experiences systematically excluded from the domain of political consideration. In this way, Tronto’s conception of care reflects much of what Deborah Creamer asserts through her ‘limits model’ of disability, that dependency and limitation are not aberrations to be overcome but fundamental aspects of the human body, inviting more inclusive and relational frameworks for understanding personhood, justice, and community.

⁴⁷⁴ Daniel W. Hardy, *Finding the Church: The Dynamic Truth of Anglicanism* (London: SCM Press, 2001), 40.

⁴⁷⁵ Tronto, *Moral Boundaries*, 162.

Kittay's and Tronto's critiques converge in their insistence that dependency is not an aberration but a central and enduring feature of the human condition. Kittay's concept of 'dependency work', highlighted in Chapter 2.3, names the often-invisible labour—disproportionately borne by women—required to sustain those who cannot care for themselves. This labour, essential to the survival and flourishing of any society, remains structurally unsupported and morally undervalued precisely because it does not conform to liberalism's ideal of the disembodied, self-sufficient subject. Tronto likewise argues for the political revaluation of care, proposing that interdependence—not autonomy—should serve as the organising principle of democratic life.

Maurice Hamington brings further depth to this argument by insisting that care is not only relational and structural but also fundamentally embodied. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, he emphasises the role of embodied perception, habits, and lived experience in shaping moral understanding. In this way, parallels between Hamington's approach and the lived experience of liturgical worship can be made. While Merleau-Ponty sees the body as fundamentally structured for perception, Hamington extends this to propose that the body is also fundamentally structured for care—what he terms *embodied care*.⁴⁷⁶ Within this relational ethic, Hamington acknowledges the body as a dynamic site of imagination, knowledge, and habits that guide and inform the interaction between caregiver and care-receiver. As he states:

The body provides resources in imagination, knowledge, and habits that make it possible to transcend time, space, and social situation to care for others. This care is not a totalizing impulse, claiming to occupy another's subject position, but rather an extension of the flesh that allows for a level of understanding. Caring imagination, caring knowledge, and caring habits are enmeshed in a dynamic relationship.⁴⁷⁷

The avoidance of care becoming a 'totalizing impulse' resonates with the relational asymmetry of the *Other* that Emmanuel Lévinas insists must be preserved in ethical

⁴⁷⁶ Hamington, *Embodied Care*, 4.

⁴⁷⁷ Hamington, *Embodied Care*, 121.

encounters, where the Other will always exceed comprehension, whether idealised or diminished. As noted in the previous chapter (4.3), in Lévinasian terms, ethical responsibility arises precisely from the irreducible alterity of ‘the face’ of the Other, which confronts the self with a demand that cannot be subsumed under imposed categories. Hamington’s articulation of embodied care aligns with this insight by essentialising the importance of bodily attunement and affective imagination without collapsing the distinction between the self and the Other. Rather than striving to occupy the Other’s position (or diagnose and ‘fix’), *embodied care* fosters a responsive attentiveness that honours the Other’s singularity, vulnerability, and unknowability (infinity). Thus, care becomes an ethically generative mode of relation that resists domination or appropriation, remaining open to the ambiguity and unpredictability of the Other’s needs and presence. This belies the desire and logic of universalisation, calculation, or predictability underpinning market-driven intentions.

We can see that from both a political and ecclesial perspective, dependency is difficult. However, far from being a private or apolitical concern, care is revealed to be an organising logic for social practices that structure the possibilities of justice, equality, and democratic participation. The liberal tendency to exile care from public consideration—to treat it, in Kittay’s terms, as something ‘tucked away metaphorically and literally’—has not only obscured the real conditions of human life but perpetuated structural injustices that fall along lines of gender, ability, and socio-economic status.⁴⁷⁸ Reorienting political and ecclesial life around the realities of care and interdependence is not a retreat from justice but a deepening of its ethical and material commitments.

Maxine Eichner sharpens this critique of liberal autonomy by grounding it in a life-course perspective—how individual lives unfold over time in relation to social, historical,

⁴⁷⁸ Kittay, *Love’s Labor*, 193.

and institutional contexts—that exposes the pervasive and inescapable nature of dependency. While liberal theory constructs the ideal citizen as an independent, rational agent, Eichner dismantles this fiction by demonstrating that dependency is not an exceptional condition, but a recurring and ordinary aspect of all human lives. As she writes:

A small but significant number of citizens will never achieve a substantial degree of independence from the caretaking of others because of physical or mental disabilities. Most others will enter an adulthood in which they are largely, although never completely, independent. All adults have some periods in which they require significant caretaking because of physical or mental illness. Further, a considerable portion of adults will experience serious disabling conditions that will leave them dependent for long periods of time, if not permanently. And as they age and approach the end of life, most adults will become increasingly dependent on others for care.⁴⁷⁹

By tracing the inevitability and recurrence of dependency across the human lifespan, Eichner dismantles the liberal assumption that care is a marginal or residual concern—applicable only to a minority population and thus irrelevant to the structure of public life.

Her analysis reveals that the autonomy so prized by liberal theory is, at best, a fragile and temporary state, made possible only through the ongoing presence of care. The liberal subject is thus not merely a misleading abstraction, but a normative illusion that systematically obscures the relational and institutional ties upon which lives depend. Crucially, Eichner links this misrepresentation to policy consequences: when the state assumes autonomy as the default, it abdicates its responsibility for care. In its place, caregiving is privatised—delegated to families, overwhelmingly to women, and unequally distributed across social and economic lines. Eichner’s call for a ‘supportive state’ model is therefore not simply a plea for increased services, but a structural reimagining of the relationship between citizens and government, one that treats caregiving as a shared civic obligation rather than an individual or privatised familial burden.

⁴⁷⁹ Maxine Eichner, “The Supportive State: Government, Dependency, and Responsibility for Caretaking,” in *Care Ethics and Political Theory*, ed. Daniel Engster and Maurice Hamington (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 87–88.

Eichner's critique of liberal autonomy—particularly her insistence that dependency is a recurring and inescapable dimension of the human life-course—casts a searching light on ecclesial forms that mirror these same ideological assumptions. Nowhere is this more evident than in the ecclesial polity of the Church of England, which continues to operate with a tacit ideal of the autonomous parish church and expressions of localised worshipping communities that are self-sustaining, financially viable, and numerically growing. Yet this model subtly encodes dependency—whether organisational, pastoral, or financial—as a form of failure, an aberration from the norm rather than an ordinary and expected feature of ecclesial life. In such a framework, struggling parishes are not met with mutual care but are often subject to strategic rationalisation, closure, or absorption into other, more 'viable' churches. This managerial impulse reveals the extent to which liberal assumptions about autonomy have shaped ecclesial governance and ecclesiology itself. Against this backdrop, Eichner's call for a supportive state resonates ecclesiologically: what would it mean for the church to adopt a posture of supportive interdependence rather than institutional self-sufficiency? How might ecclesial structures reflect not the fiction of independent flourishing but the reality of shared limitation and care?

Reimagining the church through a hermeneutic of disability—as a body marked by dependency, sustained by care, and constituted by the grace of mutual support—offers a vital corrective to the pathologies of ecclesial autonomy. In doing so, it invites the Church of England to rediscover its polity not as a network of independent sites, but as a communion of communities, bound together not by efficiency or growth, but by the theological claim that dependency is not a deficit, but a site of divine encounter and welcome.

Conclusion

Throughout this final chapter, we have seen that in dialogue with the work of Tronto, Kittay, and Hamington, Maxine Eichner's life-course analysis of dependency reveals the structural fiction at the heart of liberal political thought: the myth of the autonomous, self-sufficient subject. Dependency is not a marginal anomaly but a recurring and constitutive feature of human life. What is required, then, is not simply the accommodation of care within existing institutional frameworks, but a fundamental reordering of those frameworks around the reality of interdependence. This is what it means for the church to care. Such a reordering carries profound ecclesiological implications. When ecclesial interests are shaped by liberal imaginaries—autonomy, competence, efficiency, and strategic growth—they risk aligning themselves with a vision of the body politic that denies its own vulnerability. From the perspective of a hermeneutic of disability, such visions are exposed as both theologically and anthropologically deficient. Deborah Creamer's limits model helps reframe the church's response to decline not as a crisis to be overcome through greater strength or managerial agility, but as an invitation to inhabit creaturely limitation with dignity and mutuality.

In this light, dependency becomes a site of theological meaning. It signals the finitude that defines human existence and invites a participatory mode of ecclesial life grounded in mutual care. The church, read through this lens, is not a collective of the autonomous and able, but a community in which vulnerability is neither hidden nor pathologised. It is embraced, even dignified, as a mark of fidelity to the cruciform life of Christ. Such a church does not simply minister to those in need of care; it recognises itself as always already dependent, implicated in networks of giving and receiving care.

Yet this vision stands in stark tension with the operational logics that increasingly define the Church of England's institutional life. As Oliver O'Donovan warns, the difference between the Antichrist and the true Messiah is often imperceptible, but the

consequences of mistaking one for the other are profound. As he suggests, heresy is usually more attractive, more coherent, and more expedient than orthodoxy. This is precisely the danger of *ecclesiocracy*—ontologised church bureaucracy—that currently governs much of ecclesial polity and growth strategies in the church. The appeal is understandable: clarity, order, decisiveness. But its seductiveness lies in its promise to deliver the goods of the kingdom of God—abundance, growth, unity—without the costly path of a cross-shaped fidelity. In this way, ecclesial bureaucracies (expressed through strategy), however well-intentioned, can become vehicles of deformation. What appears prudent or efficient may in fact be a form of anti-witness—subtly reconfiguring the church’s telos while claiming to secure it.

This is not to say that bishops in the Church of England are uncaring. Far from it, but the culture they inhabit, and the logics to which they have become captive, lead to a pattern of consistently overreaching. Shepherds caught in the long grass of growth strategies instead of the nourishment of spiritual wisdom and lost in the nettles of managerial order over the wellspring of interdependent care. In this context, Pope Francis’s call that priests should carry the ‘odour of the sheep’ becomes more than a pastoral metaphor—it becomes a diagnostic ecclesiological imperative. Bishops and leaders removed from the daily realities of *care-giving* and *care-receiving* risk becoming ecclesial bureaucrats, shaping systems while misperceiving the needs those systems are meant to serve. This is precisely the danger that Tronto identifies when care becomes stratified: the powerful *care about* and are *taking care of*, while the less powerful are left to do the embodied work of *care-giving* and *care-receiving*. The consequence for the local parish church is a disembodied, abstract form of ecclesial authority—one that has become remote, idealised, and ultimately unaccountable.

Against this drift, the church is called not to managerial perfection, but to return to God’s grace. A community of care is not one that hides its wounds behind the veneer of strength, but one that dwells with others in shared fragility. It is precisely in the humble

practices of mutual care, attention, and embodied solidarity that the church bears its most faithful witness to Christ. The Church of England would do well to reimagine its vocation not around metrics or missional efficacy, but through the quiet fidelity of *caring with*. In doing so, it may begin to recover its calling to be the church that grows through a deepening care of every-body.

CONCLUSION

In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!

Colossians 3.11

This thesis has traced how contemporary narratives of congregational growth in the Church of England have become deeply entangled with managerial, neoliberal, and market-driven logics. From the statistical dashboards of decline to the strategic ambitions of the *Renewal and Reform* programme, the language of efficiency, measurability, and optimisation has increasingly shaped ecclesial responses within ever-decreasing definitions of what renewal might mean. Yet, as the historical, theological, and sociological analysis has shown, growth construed in such terms risks instrumentalising the body of Christ, distorting the church's identity into that of a managed organisation rather than a faithful Christian community in a theological register.

Against this trajectory, this thesis has argued for the critical and constructive significance of a hermeneutic of disability in the context of church growth imperatives. Disability disrupts the assumption that flourishing is best measured in productivity, autonomy, or achievement, and instead affirms interdependence, precarity, and care as constitutive of all life. In so doing, the hermeneutic reframes ecclesial decline and limitation not as crises to be overcome, but as sites of theological meaning where grace, hospitality, and mutual belonging are made known. By drawing on disability theology and care ethics, this thesis has also articulated an alternative polity: one of bodily contentment. This contentment follows a commitment to the reception of Joan Tronto's ideal of caring *with*, highlighted in the final chapter, as a democratic mode of care that centres collective

responsibility and interdependence, which in turn calls the church to reimagine what it means to grow.⁴⁸⁰

Rather than measuring success through expansion or replication, caring *with* foregrounds the ethical and theological significance of relational depth, responsiveness to vulnerability, and the shared inhabitation of fragile and interdependent life. As Anna Katherine Shurley suggests, this becomes ‘an invitation for the body of Christ to amplify the witness of every part of the body—not simply those that function according to the world’s criteria for normality.’⁴⁸¹ Through this approach, fecundity is discerned not in growth metrics but in the church’s capacity to live faithfully in the world with a continual dependence on the grace of God and one another. Brian Brock notes that the latter also reflects a posture of faithful worship, given that ‘taking the time to hear is ultimately a matter of attending to bodies, of taking the creaturely tangibility of people seriously. [...] Responding bodily to another body is a form of praise of the body’s Creator and an agreement to be an agent of that body’s Sustainer.’⁴⁸² Here, care is revealed as a theological act: to attend patiently to another’s embodied reality is to bear witness to the love of God in Christ. From a missional perspective, such attentiveness is not peripheral but central, for it embodies the Gospel through practices of presence and fidelity rather than efficiency and expansion. Maurice Hamilton presses this further by highlighting that our ability to care is not grasped in the abstract but acquired through habituated bodily practices ‘that are an expression of its knowledge’, and as such are generative, given that ‘caring habits are the practices of embodied beings that contribute to the growth and well-being of self and others.’⁴⁸³ From an ecclesial perspective, such habits form the church not as an organisation

⁴⁸⁰ Tronto, *Moral Boundaries*, 30.

⁴⁸¹ Anna Katherine Shurley, *Pastoral Care and Intellectual Disability: A Person-Centred Approach* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2017), 9.

⁴⁸² Brock, *Wondrously Wounded*, 137.

⁴⁸³ Hamington, *Embodied Care*, 4.

of strategies but as a community whose very body learns, through repetition and practice, how to live well through a sense of bodily contentment.

Future development

Throughout this thesis, I have argued that the church, reimagined through a hermeneutic of disability, can be understood more theologically as a body shaped less by the imperatives of growth and survival and more by an ethic of care. In this regard, the church is more faithfully understood as precarious, rather than perfected. This reparatory approach recognises that vulnerability, dependence, and limitation are not deficits to overcome, but rather, are intrinsic to all bodies, both human and ecclesial. In taking this approach, it resonates with the *Care Manifesto* highlighted in the final chapter, insisting that care must not be regarded as secondary, but as a primary organising principle, capable of displacing market logics and generating renewed forms of common life.⁴⁸⁴

Future development could include exploring what it means ecclesialogically to view the church, as the body of Christ, as being disabled. This would imply that the flourishing of the church, in the face of declining numerical attendance, is therefore not located through the epic narratives of efficiency, productivity, or growth, but by its capacity to embody the theodramatic concerns of mutuality, interdependence, and attentiveness to the modalities of care. This shift would also reflect the Augustinian distinction between the *ecclesia peregrinans* and the *ecclesia triumphans* that serves to sharpen this perspective. The church on earth is always a pilgrim body—fragile, dependent, limited, and unfinished—awaiting its perfection in the eschaton with the saints. To mistake the *pilgrim* church for the *triumphant* one is to collapse its eschatological horizon into an illusion of permanence or control. To acknowledge this distinction is to recognise dependency as the fulcrum of

⁴⁸⁴ Chatzidakis et al., *The Care Manifesto*, 19.

ecclesial life. As Nicholas Healy observes, this move is a ‘witness to our dependence upon the Other, upon God and his presence in others.’⁴⁸⁵ This would be a trajectory of exploring the implications of an ecclesiology with the disabled God.

Recognition of this ecclesial witness would also yield insights when attending to the realities of ageing and death. Just as bodily creatures inevitably age and die, ecclesial bodies too must face the possibility of diminishment and mortality. An ecclesiology shaped by care will not deny these realities but will ask what it means to accompany churches in decline with faithfulness and dignity. As such, end-of-life care (ecclesiologically speaking) is not a capitulation to decline but a witness: the refusal to measure worth by survival alone, and a trust that even fragility and loss belong within the hope of God’s redeeming presence. This would be an Easter ecclesiology worth exploring.

Further developments might also explore these insights by examining how ecclesial governance could be reshaped through recognising the theological relevance of care as the central organising logic, and how a hermeneutic of disability might be furthered through a sustained engagement with care ethics. This would not only reconfigure the church’s response to decline but also render it more intelligible as a vision of living faithfully as the body of Christ through hospitality, limitation, and interdependence. If taken forward, this project could help to open a more hopeful ecclesiological horizon—one in which decline is not a threat to be overcome, but the very place where the church encounters the grace of God and the promise of renewal.

Ultimately, the challenge for the Church of England is not to abandon growth but to recover its theological horizon: to resist captivity to market imaginaries and to reimagine its future as a body marked by shared fragility, mutual responsibility, and the quiet fidelity of care. This is not about replacing one model with another, nor denying the reality of decline,

⁴⁸⁵ Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life*, 151.

but it does refuse to allow managerialism to define the church's mission. Instead, it insists that the church, as the body of Christ, is most fully known when its strength is revealed through weakness, when its witness emerges from embodied practices of care, and when its growth is received as a gift rather than a strategy. In this way, the Church of England may yet find renewal, not through optimisation or expansion, but through the grace of becoming a church that takes care seriously.

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