

**A Critical Evaluation Of The Potential Of Liberation Theology
To Renew The Irish Church Today**

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the model of Church promoted in Liberation Theology with a view to anticipating the possibilities this unique ecclesial vision presents to the Catholic Church in Ireland. This branch of theology has its origins in the efforts of communities of the poor across Latin America to break free from the stranglehold of poverty and create a more equitable social order that reflects their needs and aspirations. Liberation Theology interprets the oppressive societal conditions that the poor have to endure in light of the liberating power of the Gospel message and provides the stimulus for those once consigned to the margins of society to become a collective force for change in the world. This thesis provides a probing analysis of the core theological convictions that underscore the activities of the 'Comunidades Eclesiales de Base' and reflects on the potential of this paradigm of Church to reverberate beyond the time and place of its genesis and generate a new momentum into the mission of the Church throughout the world.

The aim of this dissertation is two-fold; to provide greater theological legitimacy to each defining feature of a Base Christian Community and to ascertain a deeper insight into how this dynamic of Church can be adapted to an Irish context. This dissertation is structured in accordance with the stated aims and the focus moves from determining the theological basis to this model of Christian community to examining how this ecclesiological vision can give renewed meaning and purpose to the activity of the Church in Ireland today. The Literature Review is integral to the process of establishing a theological framework against which the activities of a Base Christian Community can be more clearly understood. The research then widens the lens of theological inquiry to encompass the views of Western progressivist theologians and Irish social justice activists on the themes explored in the literature review. Theological inquiry throughout this dissertation develops in correspondence with rather than in isolation from the distinctive dynamics of these communities. The inquiry identifies the recurring patterns that exist between these diverse theological perspectives and illustrates how they combine to further consolidate the identity of a Base Christian Community.

The research then explores how this paradigm of Church can be integrated into an Irish context. To achieve this, the researcher follows 3 distinct methodological routes; case studies with Irish social justice activists who call for a radical new departure for the

Catholic Church in Ireland at this time, ethnographic research among members of Base Christian Communities here who have experienced first-hand the appeal of this emerging ecclesial dynamic and Action Research with a team of participants in Waterford who reflect on the process of initiating a Base Christian Community in the city. The goal of this phase of the inquiry is to give further clarity to the distinctive dynamics of a Base Christian Community and to devise specific strategies to advance the promotion of this model of Church in Ireland today. This research is built on the premise that reflection on action can provide the gateway to knowledge, and, as such, arrives at its conclusions in consultation with people who have direct experience of these grassroots Christian communities in Ireland. The researcher, in his role as reflective practitioner, adapts the findings that emerge through this stage of the inquiry to the activities of a Base Christian Community that he is actively involved in. This dialogue between theology and the lived expression of core theological principles grounds the inquiry in the practical considerations that are integral to the growth and development of these communities in Ireland.

The concluding chapter of this thesis provides a synthesis of the theological understanding that gives credence to the activities of Base Christian Communities around the world and reflects on the implications of this ecclesiological vision for the Catholic Church in Ireland today. The research indicates how the Base Christian Community provides a template for a new way of being Church in the world, one that is animated by the creative energies of the people as they discover meaningful ways of bringing the Gospel to life in their communities. The conclusions call for a new climate of dialogue and consultation between the hierarchy and the people so that those on the fringes of the traditional ecclesial paradigm become integral to the process of renewal in the Church here. The research emphasises how Christian communities synonymous with the promotion of social justice discover in their solidarity with those on the margins those very qualities needed to sustain them through each phase of their evolution. In summary, the research offers a probing appraisal of the need for a more inclusive and more compassionate model of Church and points towards the role those once sidelined in the Church can play in making this happen.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Research Background

It has been argued that the credibility of the institutional Church in Ireland has been severely damaged in recent years as it heads down “a road of irreversible and terminal decline, haemorrhaging previously committed members and surrendering its moral authority in the wake of the clerical sexual abuse scandals” (Ganiel, 2012:35). Bohan believes that the residual scar from this appalling chapter in the Church’s history here continues to “scream at us and tell us we have no choice except to change course” (Bohan & Shouldice, 2002:118). Dorr contends that in the wake of the revelations in ‘The Ryan Report’ (2009), ‘The Murphy Report’ (2009) and ‘The Cloyne Report’ (2011), the anomalies of the traditional ecclesial model have been exposed and those in authority are compelled to take appropriate measures if the Church here is to be effectively to re-aligned with its people: “The present loss of credibility of Church authorities shows how urgent is the need for change. It is essential that we move towards a real sharing of authority at all levels in our Church and a firm commitment to transparency” (Dorr, 2011:5). McDonagh views the crimes of clerical abuse and the subsequent cover-up as systematic of a deep malaise within a Church more intent on preserving the established institutional norms than in promoting the radical reform that these crimes necessitate:

Despite many sincere expressions of apology to victims and congregations for the sins of clerical sex abuse and their cover up, church leaders and members generally do not seem to be energised anew... Perhaps we are still too protective of the institution, still more interested in damage limitation than in the lamentation with sackcloth and ashes, which our complicity in such horrors calls for. (McDonagh, 2007:61)

The question this thesis poses is clear and unambiguous; has the time come to anticipate a new path for the Church in Ireland that more accurately reflects the ideal of Christian community promoted in the Gospel? For the purposes of clarity, the term ‘Church’ throughout this dissertation is used to denote the Roman Catholic Church and the term ‘Irish Church’, in turn, is used to signify the activity of the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland. Mannion underlines the futility of adhering to established ecclesial formulas that have become progressively more removed from the spiritual needs of the people in each

new generation: “The past may be draining vitality from the church; thus, the church has the important task to discern what is life-giving and what is destructive” (Mannion, 2007:194). Mannion recognises that within the constraints of the prevailing paradigm of Church those in authority “often persist in defending structures of church governance, ministry and accountability that are ill suited to these times and are detrimental to the flourishing of ecclesial community” (Mannion, 2007:195). Dorr argues that unless those in leadership open the dynamic of governance in the Church up to the people, they risk creating a deeper rift between the Church and its people: “It is a matter of great urgency for bishops and priests to make quite radical changes in the way their authority is exercised. It is only by doing so that our Church can regain credibility and effective authority” (Dorr, 2011:7). Dorr underlines the importance of listening to the voices of those traditionally consigned to the periphery of the Church so that the people, in consultation with their leaders, can activate an era of renewal in the Church here: “There is a particular need to take account of the experiences and the thinking of those whose voices have been largely unheeded until now” (Dorr, 2004:239). In her journal article ‘Omega: the People’s Voice – reflection on Parish Consultation’ (2011), Redmond calls for a new spirit of dialogue and collaboration between clergy and laity in parishes throughout the country so that the people can shape and influence the future direction of the Church in Ireland:

For the Church to go forward, it appears self-evident that there will need to be a new era of group endeavours of the lay faithful, working together, with clergy and religious, in the course of responsible participation in the life and mission of the Church. (Redmond, 2011:78)

Liberation Theology promotes an alternative model of Christian community that mobilises the people to bring their creativity and spirit to bear on the life of the Church. Born out of the concerted efforts of the marginalised people of Latin America to free themselves from the stranglehold of poverty and destitution, the *Comunidades Eclesiales de Base*, or Base Christian Communities as they will be referred to in this dissertation, represent a decisive shift away from how the Church has traditionally operated in the world. Boff acclaims the unique dynamism that is palpable at the ‘base’ of the Church across Latin America and believes that the momentum for change is being generated by people who “are not just poor; they have a power of utopia, in thought and action; they are historical

agents; they are capable, together with others, of transforming the perverse society under which we are suffering” (Boff, 2002:79). Couto Maia captures how the Gospel and not the dictates of those in authority becomes the point of reference in the Base Christian Community as the people discover ways of assimilating the Gospel into the everyday realities that define their lives: “In the Base Ecclesial Communities they practised the popular interpretation of the Bible. The people used to read the text and interpret it. The first great liberation is the liberation of the voice. Intuitively the poor are able to situate the word of God in their lives” (Couto Maia, 2009:73). Teixeira reflects on how this distinctive style of biblical hermeneutics provides the “nucleus” from which the people draw their sustenance and vitality: “The new approach enables the poor to see the Bible as a familiar book reflecting their own situation as if in a mirror, and they take fresh stock of this word, which comes to signify the source of inspiration and life for them” (Teixeira, 2002:42). In these communities, power percolates from the people upwards and primacy is given to actualising the significance of the Word in the immediacy of their environs. McDonagh reflects on the potential of the distinctive style of Christian witness that is prevalent in these communities to breathe new life into the Church’s mission in the world:

Unless Christians are prepared to learn from and be changed by expressions of the Word in the wider human world, they will not engage in any real dialogue. More significantly they will have betrayed the Word in the World, which they believe they have been explicitly commissioned to serve. Service, humble service, to Word and World is the key practice here. (McDonagh, 2007:52)

Liberation ecclesiology views the people as theological subjects in their own right and recognises the enduring worth of their efforts to create a more just and equitable social order for their communities. Teixeira argues that Latin American theologians have etched out an ecclesiology that resonates beyond the place of its origins: “The experience of base communities has encouraged the genesis of a new face of the church, characterized by its features of communion, commitment, and participation and marked by the dynamic of following Jesus Christ” (Teixeira, 2002:38). Here, the Church is not a static, rigid entity intent on perpetuating its dogma and its structures in each new era. Rather, the Church is something dynamic, something that evolves in correspondence with the needs and the creativities of the people. Teixeira underlines the possibilities that this ecclesial paradigm opens up for the universal Church: “Perhaps the greatest richness of this church experience is to be found in its potential for dialogue and its capacity for permanent rebirth, which

indicate its potential for openness to the new horizons that continually open up throughout history” (Teixeira, 2002:38). Boff reveals how the ecclesiology of liberation is rooted in the creative energy of the people and their resolve to create “a new model of church, more rooted in people’s daily lives, more committed to justice, organized more around forms of community and participation than of hierarchization and subordination” (Boff, 2002:79). Boff believes that the model of Base Christian Community anchors the ideal towards which the universal Church is moving in the concrete realities that are unique to each new time and place.

In this way the Brazilian experiment encourages Christians to hope that we can have a different and a better future. This is not only possible. Among us, it has become a palpable reality, charged with values and promises for ourselves and for so many others who are pursuing the same quest. (Boff, 2002:83)

Liberation Theology began to impact on Irish theological reflection in the 1970s and 1980s. In December 1976, the first conference on the theology of liberation was organised by the Student Christian Movement and chaired by Michael O’ Sullivan, aimed at promoting a parallel movement in Irish theological inquiry to provide a stimulus for Christians here become a liberating force in Irish society. O’ Sullivan captures the decisive shift in theological discourse at this time: “The point of departure of theological reflection is the engagement of Christians in the process of liberation” (O’ Sullivan, 1977:65). The conference questioned the polarities that exist between Church leadership and the people within the prevailing hierarchical norms and anticipated a time when many of the traditional functions of the Christian minister would devolve on members of local communities and local areas, creating “the very real prospect of an indigenous ministry for an indigenous community” (O’ Sullivan, 1977:67). In January 1977, The Irish Theological Association held a three-day conference entitled ‘Liberation Theology: An Irish Dialogue’ with a view to reflecting on the significance of the theology of liberation for the Church in Ireland. Francisco Claver’s reflections at the conference underlined the need for the Church here to become more vociferous in its condemnation of social injustice and to discover more authentic ways of living in accordance with the message of the Gospel: “We fear the greatest problem facing the Church today in its task of evangelisation is its general lack of credibility as a witness to the Gospel” (Claver, 1977:44). Claver, a Jesuit bishop from the Philippines, proposed that any definition of Church needed to include a concern

for and an involvement in the struggles and anxieties of the people, made possible by a Gospel inspired shared common vision “discovered by every generation, in each local church and worked out according to their special genius as a people” (Claver, 1977:50). Enda McDonagh spoke of the challenge posed by marginalised people in Irish society who often felt oppressed rather than transformed by their experience of Church and encouraged the promotion of grassroots Christian communities to create the conditions for the people to become active participants in the life of the Church here (McDonagh 1977). Sergio Torres and Tissa Balasuriya, two liberation theologians from Chile and Sri Lanka respectively, addressed ‘The Work of Justice and Christian Liberation’ conference in April 1982 and called on theologians to give renewed meaning and hope to impoverished communities here in their struggle for more equitable social conditions (Kirby 1982). Kirby explains how this conference was unique in that it created a climate of dialogue between theologians and oppressed minorities in Irish society and signalled a time when theologians here began to “listen to the oppressed and put theology at the service of their liberation” (Kirby, 1982:36). McDonagh argues that Irish theological inquiry at this time began to reflect the historical struggles of the people, in light of their faith and their potential for transformation, and, as such, paved the way for a more liberating paradigm of Church to evolve (McDonagh, 1977:88).

This research is founded on the belief that the time has come to re-visit the core tenets of liberation ecclesiology and to anticipate ways in which the model of Base Christian Community can offer new direction and hope for the Church in Ireland. In his book, *A New Vision for the Catholic Church: A View from Ireland* (2011), O’ Hanlon argues that the disillusionment that is evident in the Church in Ireland today creates an opening for a more authentic and more meaningful ecclesial paradigm to emerge here. O’ Hanlon maintains that this time of trial can provide the stimulus for people to “re-examine what it means to be church, to imagine a new vision and to begin to take the steps to implement this vision” (O’ Hanlon, 2011:9). This thesis endeavours to make this aspiration a reality.

1.2 Research Objectives

The aim of this research is two-fold; to establish a theological rationale to underscore the identity of a Base Christian Community and to identify ways in which this emerging paradigm of Church can be assimilated into an Irish setting. The primary research

objective is to critique the defining elements of a Base Christian Community in light of the vision of Church that is promoted in Liberation Theology. The theologians of liberation have formulated a theological framework to authenticate the activities of a Base Christian Community and a review of their ecclesiology provides the necessary backdrop to this research. Theological inquiry throughout this dissertation develops alongside an appraisal of the distinctive dynamics of these communities. This review will conclude with a critique of the limitations of Liberation Theology and an appraisal of the views of those who question the validity of the theological premise on which these communities are founded. The second objective is to ascertain the universal resonance of the core theological convictions that underpin the activities of a Base Christian Community. This research examines how Western progressivist theology advances a corresponding movement in theological inquiry that offers a wider perspective on the ecclesiological path needed to offer renewed hope to the Church's mission in the world today. The third objective is to critically reflect on the applicability of the vision of Church that has developed through this inquiry to an Irish context. To achieve this, the researcher conducts a series of case studies with social justice activists in Ireland who are proponents of reform in the Catholic Church so that it more adequately responds to the needs and the creativity of its people. This, in turn, will be supported by ethnographic research among existing Base Christian Communities here with a view to ascertaining a clearer picture of the distinguishing features of this paradigm of Church as it finds expression in an Irish setting.

The final objective of this research is to determine core guiding principles that are integral to the process of forming a Base Christian Community and to point towards key initiatives that could give impetus to these communities once they are established. Through Action Research, the researcher works alongside a group of committed Christians in Waterford with the intention of promoting the formation of a Base Christian Community in the city. The Action Learning Set will reflect on themes emerging from the review of selected theologians of liberation in an effort to discern a more meaningful and inclusive model of Church for Ireland. The participants will devise concrete steps to give impetus to the formation of a Base Christian Community and they will identify 3 constituent elements they deem essential to the growth and development of the community as it evolves. The researcher will become a 'reflective practitioner' in this process, participating with the group in their deliberations and applying the interventions to a Base Christian Community

that he has an ongoing involvement in. It is anticipated that new insights will emerge over the course of the Action Research that will offer further clarity on key considerations that are integral to the process of promoting Base Christian Communities in Ireland today.

1.3 Contribution to Knowledge

This research reflects on the universal relevance of the vision of Church articulated in Liberation Theology. The theological ambit of this research widens beyond the theology of liberation to encompass the views of Western progressivist theologians and Irish social justice activists on the core convictions that animate the activities of Base Christian Communities throughout the world. By broadening the scope of the inquiry in this way, the research provides additional layers of theological insight to give greater credibility to this emerging paradigm of Church. The recurring pattern throughout this research is to capture the unifying symmetry that exists between these diverse theological perspectives and to illustrate how they combine to consolidate the identity of a Base Christian Community. The research reflects on the emergence of a new orientation in theology that places the transformative impact of these communities in the context of God's ongoing involvement in the history of humanity. The insights gleaned from Western progressivist theologians and Irish social justice activists help to situate this unique soteriological vision beyond its place of genesis and open up the possibilities it presents to the universal Church. Theological inquiry throughout this dissertation is developed in correspondence with rather than isolation from the distinctive dynamics of these communities, and, as such, reflects the potential of people on the periphery of the Church to carve out a new understanding of what it means to be a Christian community in the world today. Establishing the theological basis on which a Base Christian Community is founded serves as a necessary prelude to ascertaining its potential to signal a new way forward for the Church in Ireland.

Action Research affords the researcher the opportunity to replicate the methodology espoused by theologians of liberation in grounding theological inquiry in the finite realities that define human existence. The research is founded on the premise that reflection on a specific course of action can provide a gateway to enlightenment. New insights emerge through the process of testing the transferability of the subject matter and assessing its relevance beyond its place of origin. The research will establish some guiding principles

that are deemed essential to forming a Base Christian Community and will reveal key initiatives that are integral to the growth and development of these communities as they evolve. The effect is to extrapolate new insights and theories, drawn not just from a wealth of literature but from the concerted efforts of individuals committed to giving concrete expression to these insights in their communities. Ultimately, a new level of understanding is arrived at through the process of actualising this paradigm of Church into a specific context. The diverse avenues of research converge to reveal the potential of Base Christian Communities to rejuvenate the activity of the Church within and beyond the place of their inception.

This thesis builds on two notable theological works that have responded to the emerging dynamism of grassroots Christian faith communities across Ireland in recent decades and have placed the activities of these communities in the context of a revised ecclesiological framework for the Church in Ireland. John O' Brien's *Seeds of a New Church* (1994) calls for a radical new departure in how the Church has traditionally operated here and acclaims the contribution of many diverse Christian communities at the 'base' of existing societal and ecclesial structures in heralding a new and exciting era in the history of the Church in Ireland. *Seeds of a New Church* offers a probing insight into the activities of a selection of Base Christian Communities in Ireland and then elucidates the ecclesiological understanding on which they are founded. Michael Hurley's *Parish Cell Communities As Agents Of Renewal In The Catholic Church In Ireland* (2011) provides a historical sketch of the development of the parish cell movement and establishes a clear continuity between the approach of the parish cell movement and the principles for renewed Church life promoted in Church teaching over the past half century. The examination of the cell community in the context of the call to a new evangelisation in this book is supported by the qualitative study of the experience of participants of the cell movement in Ireland. This dissertation differs significantly from these previous studies in that theological discourse throughout this research is developed alongside an assessment of the distinctive dynamics of the paradigm of Base Christian Community, and, as such, arises out of the creative vision of people at the grassroots of the Church. The originality of this research lies in the symmetry it establishes between theology and practice to achieve the objective of providing greater theological legitimacy to the transformative activities of Base Christian Communities the world over. The methodological route followed in this thesis reflects the emphasis on liberative praxis promoted in the theology of liberation and arrives at a new

level of understanding of the ecclesial dynamic under review through the process of critically reflecting on the lived expression of liberation ecclesiology within and beyond the place of its genesis. The Action Research programme, in turn, creates the conditions for the researcher to work in collaboration with participants here to identify guiding principles to assist in the promotion of Base Christian Communities in Ireland. Moreover, this research attempts to reconcile opposing voices within the Church and to promote a new synergy between the hierarchy and the people at grassroots so that together they can signal a new way forward for the Church today.

1.4 Scope and Limitations of this Thesis

This dissertation is not a comprehensive study of Liberation Theology but rather an evaluation of the significance of the unique ecclesiological vision emanating out of Latin America for the Church in Ireland. The researcher examines the writings of selected theologians of liberation who have helped to crystallise the identity of the Base Christian Community. The focus throughout this thesis lies in formulating a probing theological backdrop to each constitutive feature of a Base Christian Community and the researcher draws on relevant facets of the theology of liberation that give added meaning and direction to the unique dynamism of these communities. Likewise, the scope of Western theological inquiry in this thesis is confined specifically to Western progressivist theologians and Irish social justice activists who project beyond the current model of Church and provide a penetrating insight into the possibilities and challenges that these grassroots Christian communities present to the wider movement of the Church in the world today. This inquiry refers sporadically to relevant Church encyclicals and instructions from Vatican II onwards to elucidate Church teaching on the aspects of liberation ecclesiology under review without offering a comprehensive critique of any one document. The Action Research Programme is not intended to establish a blueprint that is universally applicable but does endeavour to establish core guidelines that can be adapted to the vagaries unique to each group and setting. As such, the primary interest of this thesis is to establish a sound theological framework against which the activities of a Base Christian Community can be more clearly understood and to signal how this emerging ecclesial dynamic translates into an Irish setting.

The research points towards the need to reach out into ‘new frontiers’ and draw on the creativity and dynamism that exists in communities and organisations outside the existing boundaries of the Church. The researcher recognises the need for a pilot programme aimed at widening the net of inquiry further and creating a forum for non-practising Catholics to articulate their views on the way forward for the Church here. Critical reflection on this process in future research would serve as a necessary prelude to ascertaining the appeal of the Base Christian Community among growing numbers of Christians here who have become estranged from the institutional Church. This thesis explores the challenges that liberation ecclesiology presents to the Church in Ireland and recognises the potential of the paradigm of Base Christian Community to bridge traditional divisions that have been the source of great conflict between Catholics and Protestants on this island. In accentuating the core theological convictions that unite all Christians irrespective of their Christian denomination, the ecumenical implications of these findings have yet to be fully elucidated. The researcher acknowledges the importance of reflecting on the dynamics of a support network for Base Christian Communities in Ireland and devising practical initiatives aimed at promoting an intrinsic solidarity between communities. A review of the pastoral strategies deployed by the Church in Latin America to forge an alliance between these communities would provide the stimulus for an assessment of corresponding measures here that would consolidate the identity of each community as part of the wider movement of the universal Church.

1.5 Outline of Subsequent Chapters

This thesis is comprised of five chapters and the overarching structure is outlined graphically in Figure 1.1 (p.14). Chapter 2 examines the philosophical and methodological considerations that have influenced this research. A critique of the two dominant philosophies of social research, the positivist and interpretive perspectives, provides a framework against which the methodological route chosen in this research can be more clearly understood. The distinctions between the two paradigms are debated at a philosophical level so as to capture the suitability of the interpretive paradigm for the current study. This chapter establishes the synergy that exists between the methodology endorsed by selected theologians of liberation and the methods employed in this research and reveals how this essential dialectic between reflection and action makes it possible to arrive at a deeper insight into the intricacies involved in assimilating the model of Church

under review into an Irish context. The main methods appropriate for this study are explored; namely case study methods, ethnographic methods and Action Research methods. The chapter underlines how the various strands of the research combine to reveal the enduring significance of the model of Base Christian Community for the Church here.

Chapter 3 reflects on how Liberation Theology carves out a unique ecclesiological vision to underscore the identity of a Base Christian Community. This strand of the inquiry examines the writings of Gustavo Gutiérrez, Leonardo Boff, Jon Sobrino, Juan Luis Segundo, Alvaro Barreiro, Maria Pilar Aquino, Rebecca Chopp, Sharon Welch and Letty Russell, among others, and underlines their achievement in providing a theological backdrop to the dynamism of grassroots Christian communities across Latin America. This phase of the inquiry explores the context out of which this model of Church emerged before examining the core theological convictions that propel these communities forward. Chapter 3 offers a probing assessment of the defining characteristics of the Base Christian Community: the alliance between the grassroots community and the wider network of the Church; the centrality of the Gospel in the life of the community; the prophetic dimension to the activities of a Base Christian Community; and, arising out of the 3 previous components, the uplifting sense of God's grace that is palpable in the worship of the people and in their solidarity for those who are suffering in their midst. The chapter then explores the criticism levelled against the theology of liberation and underlines the need for these theologians to broaden their sphere of inquiry beyond the peculiarities unique to Latin America to include issues pertaining to marginalised peoples throughout the world.

Chapter 4 examines the central dynamics of the Base Christian Community from the viewpoint of Western progressivist theologians. This chapter draws heavily on the theology of Roger Haight, John Fuellenbach, Bernard Lonergan, Thomas Groome, Johann Baptiste Metz, Thomas O' Meara, Avery Dulles, Jürgen Moltmann, Karl Rahner, Edward Schillebeeckx, Bernard Cooke and Jean Vanier in establishing a Western theological framework on which to examine the ecclesial vision articulated in the theology of liberation. The chapter is broken down into 3 distinct themes: the first examines how Western progressivist theology bridges the divide between the realm of the spiritual and the world of everyday experience and puts a spotlight on God's presence in the immediacy of history; the second illustrates how Western theological inquiry promotes a dynamic in Christian ministry that draws the people in from the periphery of the Church and

encourages them to play a defining role in channelling the presence of the Spirit in the world today; the third captures how Western theologians re-position the kingdom at the heart of theology and encourage the formation of communities of faith that live in accordance with the ideals and the values of the Gospel.

Chapter 5 reflects on how the vision of Church emanating from Latin America has already begun to impact on the Church in Ireland. This chapter draws its inspiration from people on the sidelines of the Institutional Church and is structured according to the central themes that have emerged over the course of the interviews and the Action Research programme. The first theme examines the challenges facing the Catholic Church in Ireland and reflects the views of Irish social justice activists on the potential of grassroots Christian communities that are emerging around the country to re-orientate the Church here closer to its source and closer to its people. The second theme explores an Irish perspective on the core convictions that animate the life of a Base Christian Community and illustrates how each defining element of this distinctive paradigm of Church translates into an Irish context. This theme captures how these communities have become synonymous with love for the poorest in society and create the conditions for those once voiceless in Irish society to become a force for change within their local communities. The final theme examines the guiding principles that are fundamental to the formation of a Base Christian Community, delineating the essential components that must be in place from the beginning if these communities are to endure.

Chapter 6 re-visits the original objectives of this research and synthesises the dominant themes that have surfaced through this inquiry. This chapter collates the findings that have emerged over the course of the research and then explores the opportunities that the model of Base Christian Community opens up for the Catholic Church in Ireland today. To this end, the chapter endeavours to capture the correlation that exists between the diverse theological perspectives that are presented in this research and to reflect on the potential of Base Christian Communities to re-configure what it means to be Church in the world today. Essentially, this chapter reinforces how the dominant themes in the ecclesiology of liberation find a resonance in theological inquiry throughout the world. The emphasis then turns to elucidating the implications of this new model of Church for the Church in Ireland. The chapter concludes with an exploration of the limitations of this research and anticipates possible directions for future research.

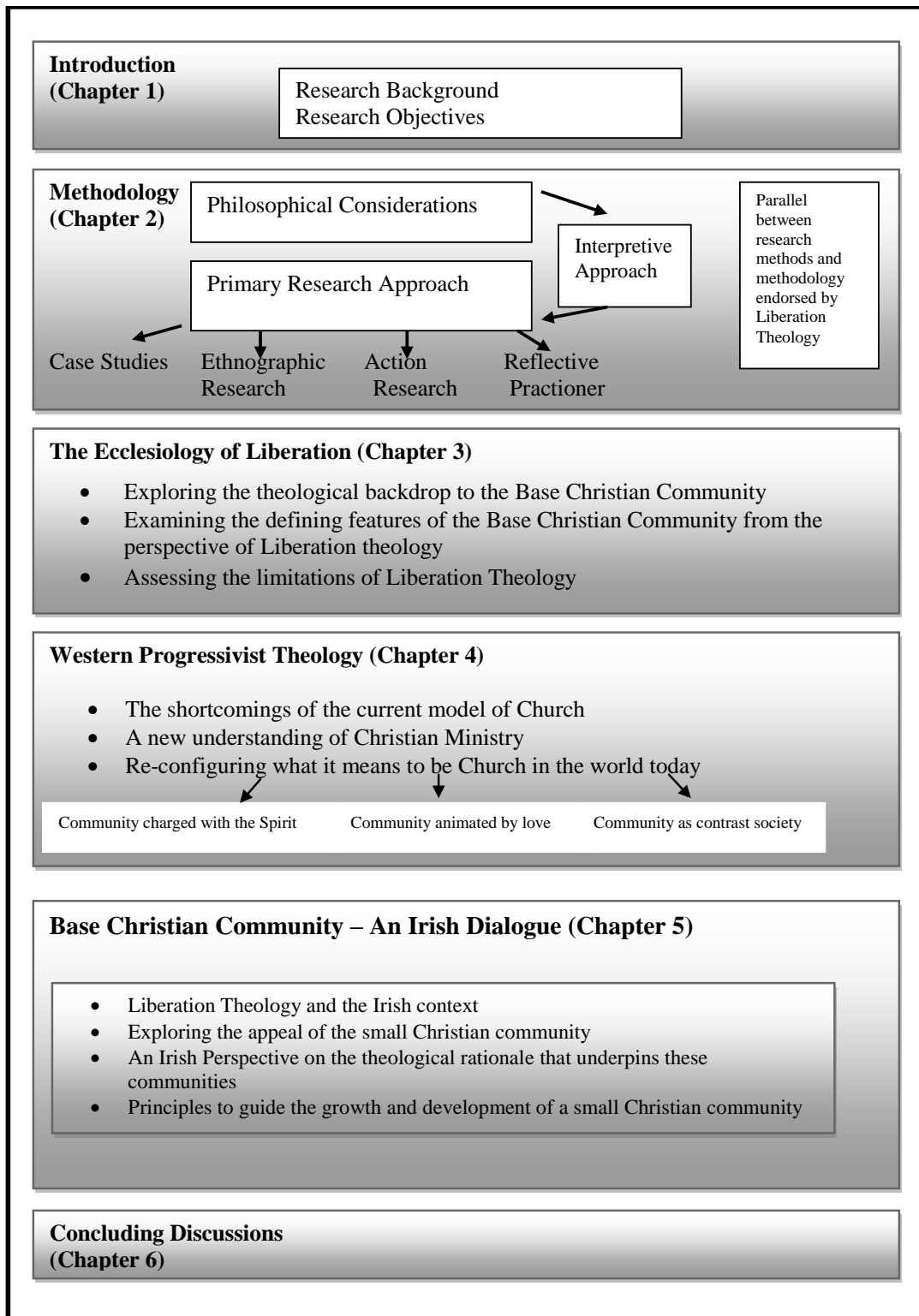


Figure 1.1 Thesis Structure

Chapter 2: Philosophical and Methodological Considerations

Chapter 2: Philosophical and Methodological Considerations

2.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to describe and justify the philosophical and methodological foundation of the chosen research strategy and to map out the research process that will underpin all aspects of methodology. Research is constructed on the foundations and underlying assumptions about what constitutes ‘valid’ research in addition to determining the appropriate research methods. Discussing the underlying philosophical assumptions of research, Guba and Lincoln (1994) argue that questions of paradigm are a fundamental starting point to guide research inquiry. The philosophical stance guides the conceptualisation, impacts on the perspective and research approach in addition to providing the means through which data is gathered and analysed. The philosophical debate resolves around paradigms, described by Guba and Lincoln as a set of basic beliefs (1985:105). Creswell (1994), in an effort to address the paradigm definition debate, suggests that paradigms in the human and social sciences help us to understand the phenomena. Gummesson’s (1991) definition identifies a paradigm as a “world view” which represents an individual’s value judgments, norms, standards, frames of reference, perspectives, ideologies, myths and theories, anything that governs their thinking and action.

This chapter is organised as follows. To initiate the discussion, it is first necessary to characterise the nature of the study in order to determine the philosophical approach most appropriate for the given piece of research. Section 2.3 (pp.18-23) commences with a discussion on different philosophies of social research; the positivist and interpretive perspectives. The distinctions between the two paradigms are debated at a philosophical level in Section 2.4 (pp.23-33) in relation to the current research. In accordance with philosophers (Burrell and Morgan 1979, Creswell 1994), the paradigms are examined along three dimensions: ontological, the nature of reality; epistemological, the nature of the relationship between researcher and what can be known; and methodological, the practice of research. From philosophy stems methodology. In Section 2.5 (pp.33-51) the main methods appropriate for this study are detailed, namely, case study methods, ethnographic methods and action research methods. Philosophical and methodological conclusions are

drawn allowing the researcher to map out his particular research process in Section 2.6 (pp.52-71).

2.2 Nature of the Study

The resolution of a social and religious issue depends on many variables and it is important that this study makes the correct methodological and philosophical decisions. Goulding (2002:16) notes that Atkinson and Hammersley (1995) argue for fidelity to the phenomena under study in the social sciences, not to any set of methodological principles, regardless of how strongly supported by philosophical arguments. However, the researcher is aware that prior to engaging in any meaningful research, it is essential to examine our fundamental assumptions regarding the nature of the world in which we live and how we perceive this reality.

The research objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To explore the unique dynamics of a Base Christian Community and to examine the contribution of selected theologians of liberation in providing a theological rationale to give credibility to this paradigm of Church.
2. To critique the elements of Western progressivist theology that give added legitimacy to the activities of a Base Christian Community.
3. To consult with social justice activists in Ireland with a view to developing an Irish perspective on the defining features of a Base Christian Community.
4. To discern the applicability of this paradigm of Church to an Irish setting in consultation with members of existing Base Christian Communities here.
5. To engage in an Action Research programme with the intention of identifying key strategies that can give impetus and direction to the process of forming a Base Christian Community.
6. To synthesise the findings from the various strands of research and to assess the implications this inquiry has for the Church in Ireland today.

As outlined in Chapter 1, the academic motivation underlying the stated objectives is to systematically explore the potential Base Christian Communities to present an alternative to the prevailing institutional model of the Church in Ireland and to capture the underlying theological premise on which these communities are founded. The researcher endeavours

to capture how Liberation Theology has crystallised the identity of these communities with its distinctive ecclesiological perspective on the core convictions that propel these communities forward. The scope of the inquiry then widens to accommodate the views of Western progressivist theologians, Irish social justice activists and existing Base Christian Community members on the potential for this emerging paradigm of Church to give new meaning and direction to the activity of the Church in the world today. Ultimately, a new level of understanding is arrived at through the process of actualising this dynamic of Church into a specific context. The researcher is a participating observer in the Action Research programme and adapts the interventions defined by this group to the activities of an existing Christian community that he has an ongoing involvement in. Critical reflection on action, or praxis, is central to this research just as it is an integral part of Liberation Theology. In summary, the goal of this inquiry is two-fold; to establish the theological basis to each defining element of a Base Christian Community and to critique the transferability of this unique ecclesial paradigm to an Irish setting.

2.3 Philosophical Considerations

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of
in your philosophy.

(Shakespeare, Hamlet Act 1: Scene 5)

Although Shakespeare suggests that human knowledge is limited, research adds to knowledge through the rigorous investigation of phenomena. The primary purpose of all research is to discover something new about the world. Bennett (cited in Ticehurst and Veal 2000:2) defines research as: "... a systematic, careful enquiry or examination to discover new information or relationships and to expand/verify existing knowledge for some specified purpose." Easterby-Smith et al. (1997:1085-1113) identify three reasons why the exploration of philosophy may be significant with particular relevance to research methodology:

1. To assist the researcher in refining and specifying the research methods to be utilised.
2. To enable the researcher to evaluate different methodologies and methods and avoid inappropriate use of unnecessary work by identifying the limitations of particular approaches at an early stage.

3. To help the researcher to be creative and innovative in either selection or adaptation of methods that were previously outside his/her experience.

The purpose of discussing the theoretical and philosophical assumptions for this study is:

...to qualify the use of specific techniques in both the underlying assumptions guiding the research and in the theoretical framework.

(Garcia and Quek, 1997: 449)

The philosophical choice between the interpretive and positivist paradigms is an important issue for all researchers. This preference is greatly dependent on the researcher's underlying philosophy and the propositions or mission at hand. Positivism, emphasising reason and logic, is the research paradigm concerned with gathering information about social facts in an objective and detached manner. Burrell and Morgan define the positivist/scientific approach in social science as:

... an epistemology, which seeks to explain and predict what happens in the social world by searching for regularities and causal relationships between its constituent elements. (Burrell and Morgan 1979: 21)

The epistemological roots of positivism can be traced to the work of Bacon (1561-1626) and Decartes (1596-1650). Bacon succeeded in establishing the experiment as the basis for new scientific theory whereas Decartes established mathematics as the fundamental instrument in scientific research. Comte (1798-1857) extended Bacon's ideas to social sciences and it is widely cited as the 'father of positivism'. Mills identifies the importance attributed to empirical inquiry in the search for enlightenment: "Society's salvation was to be contingent upon scientific knowledge" (Mills, 1865:242). This is reiterated by the view of Smith (1983), that knowledge is based on science and there is a hierarchy of science with mathematics at the top and sociology at the bottom. Figure 2.1 (p.20) represents a summary of positivist and interpretive paradigms in relation to their ontology, epistemology and methodology.

Assumption	Question	Positivist	Interpretive
Ontology	What is the nature of reality?	Stable, external reality Reality is objective	Internal reality Reality is subjective
Epistemology	Grounds of research What is the relationship between reality and research? What is the relationship between the researcher and the research?	Detached observer Possible to obtain hard secure objective knowledge Governed by hypothesis and stated theories	Empathic engagement Understood through 'perceived knowledge' Seeking to understand specific context
Methodology	What is the process of research?	Context free Concentrates on understanding and interpretation Distinguishes between science and personal experience Experimental Primarily Quantitative Seeks to maintain clear distinction between facts and value judgements	Context bound Concentrates on description and explanation Accepts influence from both science and personal experience Interactional Primarily Qualitative Distinction between facts and value judgement less clear

Figure 2.1 An overview of the positivist and interpretive paradigms in relation to their ontology, epistemology and methodology.

Source: Based on Creswell 1994:5 and Carson et al, 2001:6

The basic tenet of positivism is to focus on the fact, or the given, so that the findings that are extrapolated over the course of an inquiry are quantifiable and conclusive. Gill and Johnson (1997:33) consider the three main characteristics of positivism as:

1. The view that, for social sciences to advance, they must follow the hypothetico-deductive methodology used, with such evident success, by natural scientists (e.g. physicists) – in a nutshell, the experimental method;
2. The knowledge produced and the explanations used in social science should be the same as those proffered by the natural sciences and
3. The above entails social scientists treating their subject-matter, the social world, as if it were the same as the natural world of the natural scientist.

Positivism has had considerable influence, but it is subject to many strong criticisms. Doz (1996), for example, stated that the complexity of the world makes positivist precision impossible/undesirable. Essentially, Doz argues that positivism allows the researcher extrapolate theories and explanations that are appropriate for natural science but not adequate for social science. Gill and Johnson caution against the highly structured approaches of positivism and underline the importance of the interpretive approach in the domain of social science:

The deductive researcher, prior to conducting empirical research, formulates a theoretical model of the behavior of interest, which is then tested... what is recommended are unstructured approaches to research that ostensibly allow for access to human subjectivity, without creating distortion, in its natural or everyday setting. (Gill and Johnson, 1997:36)

The type of empirical analysis embraced by positivism in which everything is tabulated into measurable data does not lend itself to the world of the social sciences where the internal dimension is the key to understanding. This position is illustrated by Laing who cautions against blindly following the empirical route as a means of ascertaining knowledge in the study of the social world: “Persons are distinguished from things in that persons experience the world, whereas things behave in the world” (Laing 1967:53). Gill and Johnson argue that the key to deciphering knowledge in the domain of social science is to broaden the horizons of understanding to encompass all that is revealed within the sphere of human interaction:

Human action has an internal logic of its own which must be understood in order to make action intelligible. It is the aim of social

science to understand this internal logic... human action is explainable only by understanding this subjective quality. (Gill and Johnson, 1997:35)

The basic tenets of interpretive research are virtually the reverse of those that characterise positivism. It is an approach committed to studying meaning and human phenomena in context. According to Neuman, interpretive research should explore "...socially meaningful action through the direct detailed observation of people in natural settings in order to arrive at understandings and interpretations of how people create and maintain their social worlds" (Neuman, 1997:68). Burrell and Morgan (1997) emphasise how interpretive methodologies give precedence to the subjective accounts that one generates by 'getting inside' situations and involving oneself in the everyday flow of life. It is not that theory and empirical observations are deemed irrelevant but they are grounded on the learning that is drawn from the subjects' meaning and interpretational systems. The focus in the interpretive approach is on the correlation between learning and experience, a process that accentuates the importance of critical reflection on experience. The researcher argues that it is imperative to see beyond the orientations in our society which esteem factual meaning at the expense of all other types of meaning, and, as a consequence, give primacy to empirical investigation as the sole criterion of truth. To achieve this, O' Sullivan underlines the importance of crossing the threshold of science and empirical data and becoming more attuned to a deeper, spiritual realm within ourselves that compels us outward to exert a transforming influence in the world. This necessitates a "reflexive self-presence", a dynamism which he believes:

... leads the human subject to practise forms of experiencing, understanding, judging and deciding with respect to situations... in order to be transformed into situations of greater beauty, intelligibility, truth, goodness and love. (O' Sullivan, 2012:47)

The interpretive framework allows the researcher to devise a way in which human experience can be understood and reinterpreted in the light of the insights and theories which the researcher and the participants in this inquiry bring to it. Scientific forms are a mere aspect of the process whereby meaning is attributed to life but it does not encapsulate the entirety of this process. The interpretive approach, in contrast, allows the researcher to move beyond what is structured and empirically verifiable and devise a way of capturing

the fullness of the human's subjective response to life. The researcher's interest lies in "life world", defined by anthropologist Michael Jackson as:

... that domain of everyday, immediate social existence and practical activity, with all its habituality, its crises, its vernacular and idiomatic character, its biographical particularities, its decisive events and indecisive strategies, which theoretic knowledge addresses but does not determine, from which conceptual understanding arises but on which it does not primarily depend. (Jackson, 1996: 7-8)

2.4 Philosophical Assumptions in this Research

This section will discuss the philosophical assumptions applied to this research study in terms of ontology, epistemology, methodology and methods.

2.4.1 Ontology

In terms of ontology, positivists generally assume that reality is objectively given and confines itself to that which is 'positively given, avoiding all speculation'. It lies in the ontological assumption that we live in a material 'objective' world, an ordered universe made up of atomistic, discrete and observed events. According to Comte: "All good intellects have repeated, since Bacon's time, that there can be no real knowledge but that which can be based on observed facts" (Comte, 1853:3). It is a reductionist approach from complexity towards simplification, an approach based upon a mathematical view of the world. Positivist studies endeavour to test theory, in an attempt to increase the predictive understanding of phenomena. It involves: "precise empirical observations of individual behaviour in order to discover... probabilistic causal laws that can be used to predict general patterns of human activity" (Neuman, 1997:63). Within the positive paradigm, ontological assumptions view the social world as an external environment. Definite social facts affect people in similar ways and there are only regularities in individual's reactions and understanding of definite structures.

Conversely, this research is subjective in that each participant, in addition to the researcher, has a different perception of each relationship. Additionally, reality is defined the value systems that are ascribed to human endeavour as humans bring deeply felt and espoused values to interactions. These shape the way we interact and make sense of what is happening (Van der Mescht, 2002). As Remenyi suggests:

The phenomenologist understands that the world is not composed of a single objective reality, but rather is composed of a series of multiple realities, all of which should be understood and taken into account. (Remenyi 1996: 27)

Through denying the importance of human subjectivity, there is a danger that conducting this research through the lens of positivist thought would convert social processes, relationships and networks into generalised measurable phenomenon. The researcher is in agreement with Holbrook and Hirschman (1993) who advocate the use of interpretivist perspectives on the basis that those involved in the humanities are human and those engaged in the social sciences are social. Therefore, due to the fact that humans are conscious of their own behaviour, the thoughts, feelings and perceptions of the participants is vital for a full understanding of their relational capability development. Consequently, this research is situated within the interpretive paradigm where reality is viewed as subjective and the world is observed through the eyes of individuals. The assumption is that access to reality is achieved through social constructions such as language, consciousness and shared meanings (Myers, 1997). People create and attach their own meanings to the world around them and to the behaviour they manifest in that world (Schutz, 1962:33).

This research study leans heavily on the shoulders of social exchange theory which takes a behavioural approach to exchange logic and the order of relationships through the patterning of interdependencies and the resultant consequences (Thibaut and Kelley, 1959). According to social exchange theory, participation with any one relationship reflects the level of satisfaction and involvement with all relationships at an individual subjective level. Each relationship and each social justice activist, each member of a Base Christian Community or each participant in the Action Research programme in this research is assumed to be subjective and viewed through the eyes of the participants, highlighting the importance of the 'human' element. To dehumanise these interviews via research manipulation and reduce the participant actions to measurable variables via traditional positivist language would, in the eyes of the researcher, generate thin results. To convert the process of building relational capabilities into testable 'atoms' would significantly alter and falsify the research. Qualitative research accentuates the importance of uncovering the depth dimension to experience and illuminating the truths revealed in the everyday occurrences that define human existence. Essentially, qualitative research sets a process in

motion that does not precipitate the outcome of the inquiry without first retrieving the depth of meaning and insight that is revealed en route to its intended goal:

One advances by learning what others have discovered, and perhaps occasionally one may discover something for oneself. No limits are placed on what others or one oneself may discover. One's goal is not settled in advance. One may guess or make predictions, but is not impossible that the guesses or predictions may prove mistaken. (Lonergan in Lonergan, Croken and Doran ed., 2004:200)

2.4.2 Epistemology

For the positivist, ways of knowing are not shaped by the individual's standpoint or position in the world. Scientific knowledge is the only reliable knowledge which derives its objectivity through observations by a detached observer. As such, the positivist epistemology is rejected as it emphasises the role of the detached observer. For positivist epistemology, the researcher must be indifferent, disinterested, neutral and impartial eliminating all subjective elements through the suspension of preferences or personal experiences. Nagel highlights this point:

... objectivity involves not only a departure from one's individual viewpoint, but also as far as possible, departure from specifically human or even mammalian viewpoint. (Nagel, 1985:42)

Reality is objectively given and can be described by measurable properties which are independent of the observer. Positivist epistemology denies that we can know another person in a different way than as a physical object. We can learn about them only by observing their behaviour. What happens in their minds is neither publicly available nor even considered important (Neuman 1997: 67). Issues relating to the faith of the individual are deemed to be insubstantial and beyond the parameters of verifiable knowledge.

This study does not rely on objective knowledge but rather underlines the importance of capturing the subjective experiences of each participant. Qualitative researchers cannot, as readily as quantitative researchers, "insulate themselves from data" (Becker, 1996:56). It is understood that the researcher and the participants are interdependent, the actions and words of the researcher will affect the participants which will in turn affect the researcher. The researcher values the perceived knowledge that can be gleaned from extracting and vocalising the thought processes of each participant in the various strands of research. Lonergan underlines the "gradual accumulation of insights" in qualitative inquiry as

distinct from the more empirical style of investigation promoted in quantitative research: “Such knowledge is not systematic, a matter of definitions and postulates. It is not scientific, a matter of hypotheses and theories that can be verified in endless instances” (Lonergan in Lonergan, Croken and Doran ed., 2004:116). Close co-operation and contact between the researcher and the subjects are essential to reveal important knowledge regarding their relationships, the value that they attribute to them and the process of their engagement in giving witness to their faith in their lives. The researcher acknowledges the subjective nature of the research process and has taken steps to address the implications of the study subjectivity. Furthermore, religious creativity demands an epistemology that reflects the dynamic and evolving nature of the social environment wherein it is expressed:

All religious ideas and impulses are of the moment invented, taken, borrowed, and improvised at the intersections of life... through such dynamic processes of engagement that religion takes life. (Orsi in Hall, 1997:8)

The resulting knowledge will not lead to law-like generalisations in the same sense as that of a positivist. However, using socially constructed views, the research will create an understanding of the dialectic between the work of the participant and the social context in which this work is actualised. Calder underscores the importance of the intuition of the researcher, believing that it facilitates a level of discernment appropriate to qualitative research that goes beyond the quasi-statistic confines of what scientific inquiry: “Clinical judgment is not itself sufficiently specifiable to permit systematic extrapolation. Generalization of clinical judgment can be accomplished only through intuition, and this has no claim to being scientific” (Calder, 1977:361). Schön argues that in qualitative research, the practitioner does not have to hold an allegiance to pre-existing theory and technique but constructs a new theory drawn from the uniqueness of his research. Essential to this process is the need to be open to the possibilities that are embodied within each new strand of research. Whether it is the refined insights of the theologians explored in the Literature Review, or the wisdom of activists in the field who testify to the enduring resonance of the themes emanating from the theological inquiry, or the richness of the contributions of those involved in the Action Research in their efforts to define new strategies to give impetus to the growth and development of a Base Christian Community, the practitioner must allow what he learns from the multiplicity of learning experiences to inspire him to new levels of understanding and corresponding courses of action:

The practitioner allows himself to experience surprise, puzzlement, or confusion in a situation which he finds uncertain or unique. He reflects on the phenomena before him, and on the prior understandings which have been implicit in his behaviour. He carries out an experiment which serves to generate both a new understanding of the phenomena and the change in the situation. (Schön, 1983:68)

2.4.3 Methodology

The following section will discuss some methodological and practical issues in order to progressively narrow down and finally spell out a method for conducting the study. The determination of an appropriate methodology is identified succinctly by Crotty:

The strategy, plan of action, process or design lying behind the choice of particular methods and linking the choice and use of methods to the desired outcomes. (Crotty, 1998:3)

As previously discussed, for the positivist, there is a clear distinction between science and personal experience. Mental objects such as thoughts, feelings and sensations, which individuals themselves only have access to, cannot be observed or measured and hence cannot produce knowledge. Knowledge is based on what is “positively” and directly observed rather than on unobserved entities, forces or causes thought to lie behind things. Such knowledge, according to Guba and Lincoln (1994), is context free and controlled by cause and effect laws with the ultimate goal being the discovery of ‘truth’ where the purpose of science is simply to stick to what can be observed and measured. Qualitative methods, in contrast, focus on dynamic processes with the aim of explaining, rather than predicting, phenomena (Leavy, 1994). This kind of research is, according to Gordon and Langmaid (1988:2), “...centrally concerned with the understanding of things rather than measuring them”.

The aim of this study is not to test the theory in order to increase the predictive understanding of certain phenomena (Hirschheim, 1985; Myers, 1997), nor is it governed by hypothesis which would indicate emphasis on deduction in methodological considerations. Rather, this research is interpretive, placing greater emphasis on gaining an in-depth understanding of the theological rationale that underpins the vision of Church emanating from Latin America and on deciphering the views of social justice activists and members of Base Christian Communities here on how these themes can be embedded into an Irish context. In adopting the interpretive paradigm, this research draws on the

observations and insights of people in Latin America and Ireland who have first-hand experience of the effectiveness of the model of Christian community under inquiry. Hence, the researcher is in fact investigating the social as opposed to the natural world, responding to the lived experience of participants and capturing events within a natural setting. This inductive approach aims to capture the multiplicity of perspectives of social actors, and the meanings that those actors assign to events. Explanations and theories are derived arising from what has been observed. By placing a strong emphasis on qualitative research and participant observation in this study, the researcher endeavours to capture what McGuire calls “the ongoing processes by which believers create, maintain, and change their symbols for making sense out of their worlds” (McGuire, 1997: 118).

The author is aware that the word qualitative is not a synonym for ‘interpretive’ and it is over-simplistic to relate all quantitative methodology to the positivistic paradigm and qualitative to the interpretive. Instead, research methodology is dependent upon the underlying philosophical assumptions of the researcher. For example, case study research can be positivist (Yin, 2002) or interpretive (Walsham, 1993), just as Action Research can be positivist (Clark, 1972) or interpretive (Elden and Chisholm, 1993). Belk (2007:217) argues that it is possible to conduct interpretive research that utilises a quantitative methodology while remaining true to the philosophical underpinnings of interpretive research. However, this research is qualitative as it is concerned with interpreting meaning in contextual situations and in the spoken word rather than in that in collating numerical data through statistical methods. Interpretivism allows the researcher to understand the participants lived experience by capturing events within a natural setting. The researcher shares Hervieu-Leger conviction that research that aims at ascertaining new insights into the lived expression of faith must reflect the ambiguities and peculiarities of an ever changing social world:

Religion is treated as a social phenomenon in which is expressed, in a specific manner, the capacity of social actors to produce the meanings that direct their individual and collective experience... for this “lived” religion is, by definition, fluid, mobile, and incompletely structured. (Hervieu-Leger in Hall, 1997:22)

The qualitative data generated through inductive phenomenological research is particularly appropriate when process-based understanding of the significance of the ecclesiological vision promoted in Liberation Theology for the Church in Ireland. It must be

acknowledged here that participants in this research have the freedom to exercise their own creative and critical faculties in ways that may place their views at variance with the established norms of their social and religious milieu. Essentially, this research testifies to the capacity of human beings to “produce the systems of meaning that they need, in the absence of any code of meaning inherited from tradition, in order to situate themselves in a complex and continually changing universe” (Hervieu Leger in Hall, 1997: 27).

2.4.4 Capturing the Data in Qualitative Research

Qualitative research methods have been widely recommended as a method of collecting data about people’s subjective experience, their views and perceptions (Munhall & Oiler 1986, Somer & Somer 1991, Morse 1991). Burnard (1996) advocates the practice of unstructured interview when a researcher is trying to explore, in some depth, a variety of points of view and does not want to be constrained by a particular interview schedule. In the unstructured approach, the interviewer is free to take up leads, explore issues raised by the respondent, and, in the process, uncover layers of meaning and perception. Burnard underlines the importance of giving precedence to the ideas and insights that emerge over the course of the interview process as distinct from conforming to specific interview structures that may impede rather than enhance the research inquiry. The onus falls on the researcher to order the data in accordance with the recurring observations and insights contained in the original interview transcripts: “The researcher explores textual data with a view to grouping together similar types of utterances and ideas” (Burnard, 1996:278).

Burnard argues that while the unstructured interview has much to commend it as a form of data gathering, the analysis of unstructured data can cause problems. Given the fact that each interview is likely to be different both in terms of structure and content, the “grouping together” of ideas and perceptions is more difficult than is the case with structured interview data. To surmount this problem, Burnard advocates a “systematic method of analyzing textual data by breaking the text down into meaning units, developing a category system and grouping ideas of a similar sort” (Burnard, 1994:112). Ordering the analysis according to the dominant ideas or related set of perceptions that are elicited in the interviews affords the researcher the opportunity to decipher the overriding patterns that exist in the combined deliberations of the participants. Lonergan believes that this process of collating data into distinguishable meaning sets is indicative of a deeper human instinct

to transform the ‘unknowns’ of human existence into something more intelligible: “Before inquiry brings the pattern to life, before the methodologist issues his precepts, the pattern is already conscious and operative” (Lonergan, 1973:18). Ultimately, the original text of each interview becomes part of an ongoing interpretive document that captures the researcher’s attempts to make sense of what he or she has learned. It is then that a category system emerges out of the data that offers a clear and true representation of the things that were talked about in the interview:

The fact that a variety of meanings are grouped together in this way means that the researcher can begin to look for patterns in the data. What the researcher is then bound to do is to offer some explanations for the patterns. (Burnard, 1994:115)

The researcher has conducted a thematic analysis of the primary research data in this inquiry. A striking feature of research to build theory from qualitative content analysis is the frequent overlap of data analysis with data collection (Eisenhardt, 1989). Field notes, documentary sources and interview scripts were an important means of accomplishing this overlap for the purpose of this research study. Through regular review of the data, important insights that surfaced in the review of relevant literature and in the interviews with the wide range of participants contributing to this research were collated into distinct patterns to highlight the recurring ideas and convictions that were emerging through each phase of the inquiry. Reflective remarks and memos were inserted by the researcher to facilitate reflection and analytic insight, thereby assisting the researcher in identifying themes, developing categories, and exploring similarities and differences in the data, and relationships among them. Additionally, through overlap of data analysis with data collection, and the freedom to make adjustments during the data collection process, the researcher was in a position to clarify issues with the participants as the study progressed.

To facilitate the analysis process, the researcher was trained to use NVivo, a software package to facilitate the organisation and analysis of interview and Action Research session data. The NVivo computer software programme was utilised in the research process as a support system to assist the managing and analysing of the large volume of complex data attained during the course of the study. The software programme assisted the researcher in separating and ordering the findings from the myriad of theological insights that were surfacing in the Literature Review as well as helping to identify definitive

parallels between the diversity of views that surfaced in the case studies of social justice activists, in the ethnographic research among members of Base Christian Communities and in the Action Research programme. Through this process, the researcher was able to identify the common themes, and, in some instances, examine the contrasting convictions under review. All documents, including transcripts, field notes and any other relevant written materials, were imported to NVivo software. These documents formed a document system providing the basis for the processing and maintenance of all documents where appropriate (Richards and Richards, 1994). Preliminary lists of codes/themes were developed based on the conceptual framework, allowing all literary and documentary text to be highlighted and coded into distinct patterns referred to as “nodes” (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983). Coding involved segmenting the combined data into units and rearranging them into smaller groupings that facilitate insight, comparison, and the development of theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). The initial nodes were linked in tree-like structures by the researcher allowing categories of data to be broken down into linked concepts or sub-categories. The data collection options are outlined in more detail in Section 2.6.6, pp.67-69.

Thematic analysis provides a template for a coherent way of presenting the findings that emanate from this inquiry. To facilitate this, the review of literature is divided into 3 distinct sections, responding to the findings that emerged from Liberation Theology, Western progressivist theology and Irish theology in Chapter 3, 4 and 5 respectively. Within these chapters, the researcher identifies the dominant theological themes and elucidates the contribution of the theologians, or social justice activists, under review to each of these themes. Section 3.3 (pp.94-101), for example, explores the soteriological backdrop provided by theologians of liberation to give credence to the activities of Base Christian Communities. The researcher pinpoints references from the wide array of literature that reinforce the symmetry that exists between the dynamism of Base Christian Communities across Latin America and the unfolding movement of salvation through history. The effect throughout the literature review is to draw on a plethora of theological insight to consolidate the core findings pertaining to each theme. In relation to the diverse avenues of inquiry deployed by the researcher to assess the applicability of this paradigm of Church to Ireland, the same rationale applies. Section 5.3 (pp.227-253), for example, explores an Irish perspective on the distinctive features of a Base Christian Community and identifies the patterns that exist between the insights articulated by social justice

activists and members of existing Base Christian Communities here who have first-hand experience of the dynamics of these communities in Ireland. This theme moves from establishing an Irish theological framework to give credibility to each constitutive feature of a Base Christian Community to then illustrating how these features find expression in an Irish setting. Observations and perceptions are collated accordingly.

It is clear that qualitative content analysis that is a feature of this dissertation is similarly reflexive and interactive as it allows the researcher to continuously modify his treatment of data to accommodate new data and new insights about those data. The approach has something in common with the client-centred counselling approach advocated by Carl Rogers (1967) in that the interviewer may allow the respondent to take the lead in the interview and allows the respondent's own ideas to structure it. What emerges through the research is not a quasi-statistical rendering of the data as endorsed by quantitative content analysis, but rather a description of the patterns and observations of those who contribute to the research. The inference is clear; this dynamic form of analysis of verbal data must be matched by a qualitative descriptive mode of language if the true depth of insight and understanding contained within the data is to be elicited fully. Lonergan argues that the mode of language selected by the researcher can have a considerable bearing on his/ her capacity to activate the inner depths of human consciousness and thereby retrieve the subliminal realm of meaning and truth that underscores human interaction:

To reflect on the world mediated by meaning is to come to appreciate the importance of language, to discern that it fulfils cognitive and effective and constitutive functions as well as the obvious function of communicating... to learn that there are radically different techniques in which human consciousness operates (Lonergan in Lonergan, Croken and Doran ed., 2004:118)

In her journal article 'Focus on Research Methods: Whatever Happened to Qualitative Description?' (2000), Sandelowski highlights the importance of qualitative description when it comes to deciphering this under-layer of experience and reflecting on the impact the truths elicited through this reflective process can have on the broader academic inquiry. The qualitative descriptive style in qualitative research advocated by Sandelowski extends beyond the reflective response to the findings emanating from the interviews to encompass all that is revealed in the accompanying literature critique. In effect, the style becomes the medium through which the broad expanse of meaning contained within the subject matter

is captured. Sandelowski argues that qualitative description needs to be re-discovered as a valuable and distinctive component of qualitative research as it enables the researcher to elucidate the transforming impact of the insights under scrutiny: “All inquiry entails description, and all description entails interpretation. Researchers seeking to describe an experience or event select what they will describe and, in the process of featuring certain aspects of it, begin to transform that experience or event” (Sandelowski, 2000:335). Catholic historian Robert Orsi emphasises the importance of adopting a paradigm in religious studies that promotes a language style that is not over precise but reflects the dynamic nature of the social realities that we seek to be challenged by. The challenge this presents to the qualitative researcher in the domain of religious studies is clear and unambiguous:

The analytical language of religious studies, organised as it still is around a series of fixed, mutually exclusive, and stable polar opposites, must be reconfigured in order to make sense of religion as lived experience. A new vocabulary is demanded to discuss such phenomena, a language as hybrid and tensile as the realities it seeks to describe. (Orsi in Hall, 1997:11)

2.5 Methods

2.5.1 The Hermeneutics of Snowball Sampling in Qualitative Research

This chapter has argued that this research is best situated within the interpretive paradigm and as such follows an inductive, qualitative methodological approach. It is important to establish how the targeted sampling of social justice activists, members of Base Christian Communities and participants in the Action Research exists within this overarching interpretive framework. Snowball sampling is arguably the most widely employed method of sampling in qualitative research in various disciplines across the social sciences (Noy 2008). Snowball-based methodologies are a valuable tool in studying the lifestyle of groups often located outside mainstream social research, enabling the researcher in this instance to discover individuals and groups on the fringes of the traditional parameters of Church whose voices are not always recognised within the prevailing ecclesial structures. In effect, snowball sampling provides an opening for the researcher to access candidates in the wider social arena where people give expression to the values and convictions that govern their existence. Wittgenstein captures this succinctly: “If the place I want to reach could only be climbed up to by a ladder, I would give up trying to get there. For the place

to which I really have to go is one that I must actually be at already” (Wittgenstein, 1998:10e).

When this distinctive sampling method is employed in qualitative research, it leads to dynamic moments where unique social knowledge of an interactional quality can be fruitfully generated (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Limb & Dwyer, 2001). As established in Section 2.4.2 (pp.25-27), knowledge pertaining to ‘things social’ is never static or contained. Snowballing sampling provides an effective conduit into the “dynamic embodiments of social knowledge” (Noy, 2008:12) and affords the researcher the opportunity to draw new insights from the social domain that might otherwise go unrecorded. The real promise of snowballing sampling lies in its ability to uncover aspects of social experience often hidden from the view of both the researcher and the lay persons view of social life (Atkinson and Flint 2001). Noy underlines the importance of devising a methodology that takes cognisance of the internal realm of meaning and insight contained within the world of social interaction:

Yet snowball sampling is a particularly informative procedure, which deserves to be employed *on its own right and merit*, and not as a default option. When employed in the study of social systems and networks, this sampling method delivers a unique *type of knowledge*. (Noy, 2008:331)

Many researchers argue that sampling in field research should always be seen as an ongoing and emerging feature of the research process, in which further selection of sample elements is guided by theoretical understandings, reflections and judgements which emerge over the course of the research (Lee, 1993, Denzin, 1970, Glaser & Strauss 1967). Thus, in attempting to study hidden populations for whom adequate lists and consequently sampling frames are not readily available, snowball sampling methodologies may be the only feasible methods available. Developed as an original solution to overcome problems of data sampling in the study of hidden populations, they are particularly effective in locating members of special populations where the focus of the study is on issues that may not always find their way into public discourse. If the aim of the study is primarily explorative, qualitative and descriptive, snowball sampling offers clear practical advantages in obtaining information on difficult-to-observe phenomena (Blacken, Hendricks & Adriaans 1992).

Spren (1992) embeds the use of snowball sampling, non-random sampling and other ascending methodologies into a general concept of link-tracing methodologies. Ascending methodologies, such as the use of snowball techniques, can be used to work upwards and locate those on the ground who are needed to fill in the gaps in our knowledge on a variety of social contexts. Spren defines this as a sample design in which the respondent is asked to mention other persons, according to some inclusion criterion defined by the researcher. By interviewing the newly mentioned persons, the sample can be extended, the basic assumption being the existence of some kind of 'linkage' or 'bond' with other people in the sample population. Snowball sampling is sometimes used as the main vehicle through which informants are accessed, or as an auxiliary mean, which assists researchers in enriching sampling clusters, and accessing new participants and social groups when other contact avenues have dried up. Berg (1998) portrays such sampling methodologies as being created by a series of referrals that are made within a circle of people who know one another, the cyclical nature permitting loops in which a person named in a later wave in turn names someone from an earlier wave, thus creating interesting comparisons. Berg emphasises that most snowball samples will be strongly biased towards inclusion of individuals who have many inter-relationships and the absence of individual inclusion probabilities means that unbiased estimation is not possible. In effect, participants are not randomly drawn but are dependent on the subjective choices of the originally selected respondents. Whilst arguing that ascending methodologies are well adapted to the study of hidden populations, it is equally important to highlight the influence of sample bias on the selection process of participants. Foot Whyte argues that the personal bias and distortion inherent in snowball sampling is a price which must be paid in order to gain an understanding of these hidden populations and their particular circumstances believing that the confidence that develops in a relationship over a period of time is perhaps the best guarantee of sincerity and should increase the validity of the data (Foot Whyte 1982).

The basic conceptual origin of snowball sampling is that the behaviour or 'trait' under study can be conceived as a social activity, where the target sample members are involved in some kind of network with others who share the characteristic of interest. Biernacki and Waldorf argue that it is important to emphasise that the researcher must actively develop and control the sample's initiation, progress and conclusion maintaining that "the researcher begins by making contacts, if possible, with people who are personally known to reach the research criteria" (Biernacki and Waldorf, 1981:155-156). Techniques of

'chain referral' may imbue the researcher with characteristics associated with being an insider or group member and this can aid entry to settings where conventional approaches find it difficult to succeed (Atkinson and Flint, 2001). The presence of even minimal contacts may help in the process of selecting and contacting subjects for study in otherwise very hard-to-target populations as "informants refer the researcher to other informants, who are contacted by the researcher and then refer her or him to yet other informants and so on. Hence the evolving 'snowball' metaphor" (Noy, 2008:330). Unlike the bulk of sampling procedures and designs, in snowball sampling "the researcher relinquishes a considerable amount of control over the sampling phase to the informants" (Noy, 2008:332). Ultimately, the success of snowball sampling hinges on this essential dialectic between the researcher and the participants. Heckathorn (1997) argues that the researcher initiates the snowballing effect and the respondents then drive the sampling process onward. The line of exploration in snowball sampling seeks to reduce or mitigate divides between researcher and participant and underscores the organic interrelationships that exist through each strand of methodology in this research.

2.5.2 Case Study Method

Although a popular mode of enquiry, there is little agreement on what exactly constitutes a case (Merriam, 1988). According to Pettigrew (1990) the case study approach can be generally characterised as an empirical inquiry that (1) investigates a contemporary phenomenon within a real life context, when (2) the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not evident, and in which (3) multiple sources of evidence are used. For the purpose of this study, a case study is a holistic research method that uses multiple sources of evidence to analyse or evaluate a specific phenomenon or instance (Anderson, 1998: 152). In brief, the case study allows an investigation to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real life events. Although there is little agreement about what a case study is (Lincoln and Guba, 1985:360), this study supports Gillham's definition of a case as follows:

... a unit of human activity embedded in the real world which can only be studied or understood in context, which exists in the here and now and that merges with its context so that precise boundaries are difficult to draw. (Gillham, 2000:1)

The researcher explored the work of 10 Irish activists who have been influenced by Liberation Theology. These are people who embody the spirit of Liberation Theology as much through their actions as through their words and offer a distinctly Irish perspective on the applicability of the model of Base Christian Community beyond the place of its genesis. Identifying and exploring the principles that guide these people and the spirituality that underpins their work proved an effective means of anticipating how the vision of Church in Liberation Theology could be embedded into an Irish setting. David Hall's comments in his book *Lived Religion in America: towards a history of practice* (1997) are particularly pertinent in this regard:

While we know a great deal about the history of theology and church and state, we know next-to-nothing about religion as practiced and precious little about the everyday thinking and doing of lay men and women. (Hall, 1997: vii)

Although the case study is a distinctive form of empirical inquiry, many investigators nevertheless criticise the approach. Perhaps the greatest concern has been over the lack of rigour of case study research. Often, the case study investigator has allowed equivocal evidence or biased views to influence the direction of the findings and conclusions (Yin, 1984). A second common concern about case studies is that they provide very little basis for scientific generalisation and produce theories that are narrow and idiosyncratic. Additionally, it is felt that case studies take too long and result in massive unreadable documents and overly complex theories (Eisenhardt, 1989). However, a major strength of the case study approach is that it is contextual. The author of this study argues that only rich, contextual research is capable of capturing the significance and the relevance of the ecclesial paradigm promoted in Liberation Theology for the Church in Ireland. All these activists, whether religious or lay, share the same willingness to see beyond the current structures that exist within the Church here. The researcher's interest lies in capturing the particular set of beliefs and perceptions that underpin their understanding of what it means to be Church today and to reflect on their efforts to actualise these convictions in their immediate social context (See Burnard, Section 2.4.4, pp.29-30). Osri's comments in *Everyday Miracles: The Study of Lived Religion* (1997) offer an apt summation on the importance of grounding research in religious matters on questions that arise from the immediacy of the world of the participants:

The questions with which we approach religion should not concern frozen “meanings” but should instead query the complexities of lived religious practices. (Orsi in Hall, 1997: 10)

This approach is deemed necessary to extract the relational capabilities formed and translate them into novel empirically valid theories. The likelihood of a valid theory is high as the theory-building process is so intimately tied with findings that the resultant theory will be consistent with empirical observation. Case studies in this instance create the conditions for the researcher to assess first-hand the difficulties and challenges that these social justice activists encounter in their efforts to give expression to their convictions from within and beyond the boundaries of the Church. The key to these case studies is to balance the analytical with subjective interpretation of each participant’s contribution. Through careful investigation into their work and the faith that underpins it, observations can be made and parallels can be drawn between the contributions of each participant. In essence, the dialectic between the empirical and the interpretive must be held in tenuous balance if the research is to achieve its desired effect. The researcher’s interest lies in finding a methodology that is both creative and structured and that sees its subject matter as something dynamic and not something fossilised in time:

Lived religion refers not only to religion as lived by others but also to life as lived by those who approach others’ everyday experience to learn about culture and history; it infers, in other words, to the conjuncture of two lived worlds in the study of religion. (Orsi in Hall, 1997: 18)

Therefore, the case approach represents the holistic approach to method, a means through which the participants are analysed with sources of data emanating through methods described below. The case study method fits seamlessly with the ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions discussed earlier in this chapter.

2.5.3 Ethnographic Methods

Ethnographic methods fall within the inductive tradition where emphasis is on theory grounded in empirical observations, taking account of subjects’ meaning and interpretational systems in order to explain through understanding. Ethnographic methods focus on the manner in which people interact and collaborate in observable and regular ways. It is about inquiry, discovery, exploration and description. It involves research in a

natural setting with intimate face-to-face interactions with participants and accurate reflections of participants' perspectives and behaviours. Therefore, while ethnographers combine interviews and observations, the research is conducted in a passive manner. Ethnographers endeavour to understand how systems work whilst incurring as little as possible disruption to participants. A vital component in the methodology is the researcher's attempt to uncover and examine the 'taken for granted' meanings and expectations underlying the courses of action that the participants engage in (Garfinkel, in Gill and Johnson, 1997:98).

Whilst this epistemology is suitable for this study, the researcher aims to play a more participatory role in the study whereby the observer/interviewer takes on the role of a subject by participating in the activity under study. The objective is to discover a methodology that will potentially lead the researcher to a rich understanding of how the understanding of Church promoted in Liberation Theology can find an authentic form of expression in Ireland. The researcher places great emphasis on exploring 'religion on the ground' and critically reflecting on the efforts of existing groups in Ireland to give expression to the vision of Church envisaged in Liberation Theology. Through ethnographic methods, the researcher can focus on the manner in which participants give expression to their faith in observable and regular ways. The researcher visited Base Christian Communities and social justice groups in Dublin as well as a Parish Cell Group in Kildare, participating in their meetings and in some of their outreach programmes. With specific reference to 'The Fig Tree Group' in Fatima Mansions, for example, the researcher spent a day experiencing first-hand the dynamics of their Base Christian Community and interviewing members to ascertain a clearer picture of the underlying convictions that have helped to sustain this community over the past 27 years. Two months after this visit, 3 members of 'The Fig Tree Group' visited the researcher's home in Waterford for a weekend and participated in a workshop in the Edmund Rice Centre aimed at promoting the model of Base Christian Community in the city.

The researcher worked with members of 'Partners in Faith' to organise a special liturgy for the residents of Sean McDermott Street in Dublin's inner city during Easter Week in 2012. The objective of the service was to create the conditions for people to draw strength from each other and from their faith in the face of the oppressive social conditions that they had to contend with. The event was spiritually enriching and many people stayed in the Church

afterwards sharing their stories and their faith testimonies in a relaxed and informal environment. The researcher participated with members of ‘ATD Fourth World’ in planning a commemorative vigil at the Famine Memorial in Dublin on the 17th of October, 2011 to mark World Poverty Day. This event provides a platform for the people to articulate their needs and aspirations in their pursuit of justice. Again, this event was powerfully uplifting and left those in attendance with a palpable sense of the resilience and courage of the people in their efforts to create more equitable social conditions for their families and their communities. The ethnographic research among both social justice groups facilitated a process that brought the researcher into direct contact with the economically poor in Irish society today and helped to authenticate the findings emerging in the inquiry.

Through this process, the researcher was able to form a deeper understanding of the core convictions that underscore the activity of a Base Christian Community or social justice group by reflecting on the defining elements of their faith community from ‘inside’ the dynamics unique to each group. The emphasis was on interviewing and observation rather than on documentary and survey data. The researcher concurs with Calder in this regard: “For the researcher to describe the intersubjectivity of a set of subjects, he must interact with them to the extent that he acquires the ability to take their perspective so that their intersubjectivity seems natural to him” (Calder, 1977:259). Rebecca Kneale Gould adopts this ethnographic approach in exploring the world of the “homesteaders”, individual writers that pursued more meaningful lives close to nature in response to emptiness of the commercial and cultural life in North America. She recognises the importance acquiring knowledge from within the evolving dynamism of this world rather than imposing an interpretation of events from some abstract sphere outside this world:

The concept of lived religion does not attend to what is static or “wholly other”... Yet it recognises the fluidity and ambiguity of how “the sacred” is constructed and where it may be found. (Kneale Gould, 2005: 6)

Like her participants, she too turned to nature to engage in self sustaining activities such as growing food, cutting wood or creating crafts while using nature largely as a backdrop to these activities. Her comments on the benefits of this ethnographic approach to understanding something that has a deeper and more spiritual dimension are revealing:

In a strange case of life imitating scholarship, I found (while already embarked on 1st drafting of this study) that my own patterns of living and my feeling about those patterns closely matched the writing and theorizing I had already done. (Kneale Gould, 2005: xix)

The ethnographic method allows the researcher shift status from interviewer to participant observer. Gill and Johnson argue that “As participant observers, an attempt is made to learn about the culture under study and so interpret it in the way its members do” (Gill and Johnson, 1997:97). The overriding interest here lies in extrapolating new insights from the pool of wisdom and knowledge that exists among members of Base Christian Communities and social justice groups here committed to finding more meaningful ways of giving witness to their faith. This field role usually enables a great deal of depth in research since it allows the researcher to get very close to the phenomena of interest ‘catching reality in flight’ by experiencing the often hidden experience of members (Madge, in Gill and Johnson, 1997:113). The insights and observations gained from participating with these groups provide a new level of understanding of the applicability of the themes that have emerged over the course of the research. McFarland Taylor argues that attention to the lived expression of faith is:

... critical to shedding light on what religion really is because it gets at the often obscured dimension of how the faithful organize their daily lives and actively put beliefs into practice. (McFarland Taylor, 2007: xi-xii)

At critical phases in this research, the researcher reflects not only on the learning derived from the interviews with members of Base Christian Communities and social justice groups here but also on his own efforts to give expression to the key insights that have emerged over the course of these visits. There is a natural symmetry between the various strands of methodology utilised by the researcher, broadening the theological inquiry beyond a purely academic domain into the specific context wherein the vision of Church envisaged in this research is actualised.

2.5.4 Action Research

Action Research is an action-oriented research activity (Park, 2001:81), an inquiry strategy that integrates experience, action and reflection (Reason, 1994) fostering collaboration among its participants. Defined as “a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes” (Reason and Bradbury, 2001:1), Action Research is concerned with bridging the gap between research and action and hence theory and practice (Brinberg and Hirschman 1986). Action Research aims at both taking action and creating knowledge or theory about that action. The outcomes are both an action and a research outcome, unlike traditional research approaches which aim at creating knowledge only. As such, Action Research is a form of experimental research that focuses on monitoring and evaluating the effects of the researcher’s direct actions in practice within a participatory community with the goal of improving the performance quality of the community or of an area of concern (Reason and Bradbury, 2001).

Action Research is deemed suitable for this research as it borrows the logic of experimentation but applies it to natural settings. Action Research combines participative action and critical reflection (Dick, 2001:21) and claims to dually solve idiosyncratic problems for participants whilst simultaneously adding to the stock of general knowledge about change processes. The majority of authors trace the introduction of the term ‘action research’ to Kurt Lewin, who defines action research as:

A comparative research on the conditions and effects of various forms of social action and research leading to social action, using a process of a spiral of steps, each of which is composed of a circle of planning, action, and fact-finding about the result of the action. (Kurt Lewin, 1946: 202-3)

The classical action research cycle involves change and learning, organised into iterative phases of action and reflection. Reflection leads to understanding, and understanding shared by participants is fed back into action. But solely improving practice is not significant unless this research can build, inform, and test social theory (Reason and Bradbury, 2008). Consequently, Action Research is intended to advance knowledge and solve practical problems having a real world effect which can be demanding as researchers are expected to both develop knowledge and work towards positive, practical change. Argyris and Schön (1991:86) refer to this as the “double burden” referring to the

action/research debate which sets a stage for a conflict between rigour and relevance as, like most researchers, action theorists seek to observe, analyse, and develop theories of social practices that can be applied beyond the immediate research context.

Practical or iterative Action Research has the technical aspirations for change, but it also aims to inform the practical decision making of practitioners (Kemmis, 2006:95). With this type of action research, the researcher and members collaborate together to identify problems, determine solutions and evaluate outcomes. This working together approach leads to a better understanding of the underlying problems and their causes with the researcher and the practitioners coming together to identify possible interventions (Holter & Schwartz-Barcott, 1993:301). This approach is descriptive and can lead to the development of new theory (Clark, 2000:194) as the problem is defined after dialogue with the researcher and the practitioners and a mutual understanding is reached. Revans (1983:64) argues that: “one must learn by doing the thing... for although you think you know it you have no certainty until you try.” This form of Action Research seeks to improve practice through the application of the personal wisdom of the participants (Grundy, 1982) allowing for a more flexible approach in design and delivery. As McCutcheon and Jung (1990:146) state “indicative of this flexibility is the frequent use of ‘interpretive’ as an umbrella term that comfortably accommodates interactive and phenomenological perspectives.” Practical Action Research involves local people or practitioners where opinions are asked and the research is carried out in consultation or cooperation with them (Cornwall, 1996).

Emancipatory Action Research aims not only at improving the self understanding of practitioners, but also at assisting practitioners to arrive at a critique of their social or educational work or work setting (Kemmis, 2006). It promotes emancipatory praxis in the participating practitioners; that is, it promotes a critical consciousness which exhibits itself in political as well as practical action to promote change (Grundy 1982). The popularity of Action Research has been attributed to the contextual relevance of the methodology and data stemming from its use and the trustworthiness of the data collected with the goal of improving and changing a situation with research participants actively involved in the knowledge production process (Bray et al., 2000). Action Research effectively breaks down the traditional divide between the researcher and practitioner, recognising the

intrinsic contribution of each participant to the new understandings that emerge through the inquiry:

Action research is emancipatory; it leads not just to new practical knowledge, but to new abilities to create knowledge... Sharing the power of knowledge production with the researched, subverts the normal practice of knowledge and policy development as being the primary domain of researchers and policymakers. (Coghlan, 2008:214)

The researcher combines practical and emancipatory Action Research to achieve his objective in translating the paradigm of Base Christian Community to an Irish setting; practical in that the research clearly delineates the necessary steps needed to activate the process of forming of a new small Christian community and emancipatory in that it proposes key strategies to strengthen and sustain a small Christian community as it evolves. Eight participants were invited to become part of the Action Research project once the literature review was complete. In effect, contextual Action Research, also sometimes referred to as action learning, is a form of learning through experience, “by doing” and then critically reflecting on this action. Action Research essentially creates the conditions for a group to come together to reflect and act with a view to improving action. Bourner, Beaty, Lawson and O’ Hara (1996) argue that this process can be used when a group, or Action Learning Set, can support the learning of others in a context where experience can be reflected upon. In this instance, the Action Learning Set reflected on the core themes that the researcher extrapolated from his literature review and determined a course of action in response to these themes. Essentially, Action Research is a continuous process of learning and reflection with an intention of getting things done. Coghlan underlines how an Action Learning Set is essentially a participative learning dynamic “involving all stakeholders both in the questioning and sensemaking that informs the research, and in the action which constitutes its focus” (Coghlan 2008:213). In terms of this research, three action learning sessions took place. It is deemed preferable to allow the learning that evolves through this process to emerge over time in an evolutionary and developmental process, realizing, as Carroll suggests, that through this emphasis on praxis: “the truth lies ahead of us. It has to be fashioned rather than contemplated. It is approached, rather than grasped, in the interchange of action and reflection” (Carroll, 1987:79-80). Learning outcomes were attained both at group and individual level. It is argued that if the researcher is effective the hoped-for outcome will come about because of

the researcher's involvement in and not detachment from the research process (Gill and Johnson, 1997).

Central to this process was the formulation of key interventions over the course of these three meetings where the participants, having set the process of forming a Base Christian Community in motion, considered what they deemed essential to the growth and development of the community. Through engaging in this dynamic: "individuals learn with and from each other by working on real problems and reflecting on their own experiences" (McGill and Beaty, 2001:11). The preconceptions and assumptions that participants bring to this process are challenged by the new knowledge that is derived from their efforts to actualise their new learning and they begin to re-evaluate the assumptions in light of what they have learned. As noted by Revans (1998: 83): "There can be no learning without action and no action without learning." Their time reflecting on the themes emanating from Liberation Theology and the new level of understanding that emanates from their efforts to concretely respond to these themes afford the participants the opportunity to learn from each other. A deeper appreciation of the core elements needed to sustain a Base Christian Community as it evolves is arrived at through this process. This continuum between reflection and action lies at the core of the methodology that underpins this inquiry. Coghlan acclaims the potential of Action Research to initiate a process of academic inquiry that can reverberate beyond the immediacy of the research setting:

Action research is concerned with the development of practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes. It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concerns to people. Thereby it aims to transform our world. (Coghlan, 2008:220)

On consideration, Action Research is deemed suitable for this research as it borrows the participative action and critical reflection and claims to dually solve idiosyncratic problems for participants whilst simultaneously adding to the stock of general knowledge about change processes. In terms of ontology, reality is subjectively viewed through the eyes of the participant and the researcher. In terms of epistemology, knowledge is contextual with the role of the researcher being able to engage as closely as possible with the participants. Action Research is a collaborative activity. Both the researcher and the participants are co-researchers and co-subjects in the process. Regarding methodology, action research is an

interactive process primarily concerned with problem identification, problem solving, and change in practice and theory development. It involves a process of re-education, whereby participants will, over time, realise the relational capabilities that ensue from their actions. This will further change their patterns of thinking and action.

2.5.5 Action Research and Liberation Theology - a Shared Methodology

Action Research is a constituent component in this research, allowing the researcher to remain true to the methodology practiced by Liberation Theologians and to replicate the efforts of these theologians to set in motion a process of theological inquiry that identifies ways of actualising the faith tradition so as to give hope to people on the margins of society. It is important to recognise that theological inquiry promoted in Liberation Theology is something that evolves through dialogue with the cultural milieu in which it is placed. As such, it is not a static and unchanging entity but one that constantly responds to ever changing social conditions. Religious ethnographer Meredith McGuire has argued that: “We need less emphasis on quantitative methods such as surveys, opinion research, and formal organizational analysis, because these methodologies presume a relatively fixed, institutional form of religion (McGuire, 1997:119). Thomas Groome encapsulates the importance of re-interpreting the Gospel in light of the pressing realities and challenges unique to each new historical epoch:

If our pilgrimage is to unfold the vision rather than merely repeat the past, then the present cannot passively inherit and repeat the story. We must appropriate the story critically within the present experience, reclaim it, add to it with our own creative word and in that sense change it. (Groome, 1980: 194)

Liberation Theologians Juan Luis Segundo, Gustavo Gutiérrez and Jon Sobrino maintain that truth and knowledge of religious significance to Christians in the world today can only be discerned in the light of critical reflection on Christian witness. Segundo argues that in the efforts of theologians and people of faith alike to grow in an understanding of their faith tradition, they must follow what he calls a “hermeneutic circle” of reflection, a process that reflects:

... the continuing change in our interpretation of the Bible which is dictated by the continuing changes in our present-day reality, both individual and societal...and the circular nature of this interpretation stems from the fact that each new reality obliges us to interpret the

word of God afresh, to change reality accordingly, and then go back and reinterpret the word again, and so on. (Segundo, 1976: 8)

Essentially, Segundo argues that truth in Christian matters is only reached when the participant moves back and forth between religious sources and the present day realities that they are embedded in. Methodology, Segundo argues, must not centre on all that can be verified by science and by academia, but by the concerted effort on the part of those interested in Christian truth to reflect on their efforts to release the transforming power of the Gospel into the world. It is only then, he suggests, that the truths that underpin the Christian tradition are uncovered:

It would thus free academic theology from its atavism and its ivory tower, toppling the naive self-conception it entertains at present: i.e., that it is a simple, eternal, impartial interpretation, or authorized translation, of the word of God. (Segundo, 1976: 19)

Likewise, Gutiérrez underscores the importance of knowledge that arises from a process of critical reflection in the aftermath of lived Christian witness. Gutiérrez views the theology of liberation essentially as a practical theology. It is directed towards praxis and draws its nourishment from it. It claims to be a reflective 'second act' where the 'first act' is the practice of liberation. Gutiérrez contends that such theology has greater need for a social diagnostic than would have a purely speculative exercise:

From the beginning, the theology of liberation posited that the first act is involvement in the liberation process, and that theology comes afterward, as a second act... It is not enough to say that praxis is the first act. One must take into consideration the historical subject to this praxis- those who until now have been the absent ones of history. (Gutiérrez, 1983:200-201)

Gutiérrez places a very strong focus on the need for Christians to engage fully with the realities of this world and acclaims this emphasis on Christian praxis as a means of creating the conditions for Christians to exert a transforming influence in society. In participating in the promotion of the inalienable rights of the weak and the voiceless in society, a new understanding of the core truths that give meaning to life is arrived at. In effect, the people, those once sidelined on the periphery of social, academic and ecclesial structures, become central to theological inquiry and critical reflection on all that is revealed in the world of those in the shadows of society provides the stimulus for real enlightenment. Sobrino reiterates this view and argues that it is incumbent on those who

engage in theological inquiry to draw their inspiration from their own efforts to exert a liberating influence in the world:

Theological contact with reality came first, and only then reflection on the theological implications, that is, on making love and justice a reality among the oppressed. The stimulus to thought and theory came not from a tradition of theological theory but from the faith lived in a process of liberation amid conflict. (Sobrino, 1984:21)

It is clear that Liberation Theology advocates a methodology that retrieves the meaning of faith from reflection on the efforts of Christians to transform the world as their faith tradition dictates. Hennelly argues that Liberation Theology has effectively created a method of doing theology which is intimately linked not only with orthodoxy but with orthopraxis, that is, the liberating action which will provide the ultimate test of orthodoxy: “But only such orthopraxis and continuing reflection on it appear capable of moving toward a primary objective of the contemporary church: a true synthesis of faith and justice” (Hennelly, 1989: 52). O’ Sullivan echoes this view maintaining that the radical originality of the theology of liberation is that academic or spiritual inquiry lies in the insertion of the theologian in the real life of the economically poor. Essentially, spiritual understanding is reached through the vicissitudes of each new time and place and through our endeavour to translate the Gospel into history in ways that improve the quality of life of those most exposed to hardship and suffering. O’ Sullivan captures this essential dialectic between knowing and doing that underscores liberation spirituality:

Liberation spirituality conceives the call to authenticity in human knowing and choosing as an attentive, inquiring, critical, responsible and loving practice of living life in a spirit of solidarity with the downtrodden and excluded, and of spirited commitment against such oppressions as hunger, misery, injustice and political repression. (O’ Sullivan 2012:48)

Highlighting the parallels between Action Research and Liberation Theology bridges the process gap insofar as it details how Action Research can be deployed in a religious setting and clarifies the establishes the intrinsic connection that exists between liberation spirituality and the understanding of faith that underscores this inquiry. Action Research, which has been widely utilised in the nursing domain, is concerned with change and development, and hence could be deemed a suitable methodology for research which aims to detail the process of translating the model of Church under inquiry into an Irish context.

Both Liberation Theology and Action Research give primacy to critical reflection on all that unfolds in the world of experience and ensure that the ultimate verifying instrument of truth is life itself. The researcher concurs with Coghlan who argues that spiritual inquiry cannot become a purely academic exercise removed from the oppressive realities of this world but must become a catalyst for transformation of these very realities:

Spirituality is not an inward-focused experience for the development of the individual only, but one that challenges individuals to live a just life themselves and to have a personal spirituality that is both individual and social by having a concern-in-action for others and for the transformation of the world. (Coghlan, 2005:102)

2.5.6 Ethical Considerations

Without allowing people to speak freely we will never know what their real intentions are, and what the true meaning of their words might be. (Cottle 1977, cited in Burgess 1982:24)

Those involved in research with hidden populations may often have access to sensitive and potentially damaging data and should be particularly careful in the way in which their value judgements are made and about the character and consequences of their research (Mirvis 1982). The primary social and moral obligation of researchers must be to those who participate in the research process and it is their interests that must be the researcher's main concern. Andresen, Boud and Cohen (2001) argue that there is a particular ethical stance typically adopted towards participants in research projects that recognises the importance of respect for the convictions and insights of the 'learner' and values the self-directive potential of the each participant. Implicit in their views is an acceptance of the intrinsic worth of what each participant brings to the research project and the sensitivities and insights that influence their understandings:

There is an acknowledgement of the premise that learning invariably involves the whole person (senses and feelings as well as intellect; affect and conation as well as cognition); and that this is associated with perceptions, awareness, sensibilities and values being invoked, representing the full range of attributes of the functioning human being. (Andresen, Boud and Cohen in Foley, 2001:228)

Heron (1993) emphasises the importance of facilitators developing an ethical stance which takes account of the often hidden or overlooked manipulative processes that can be part of the 'neutral' facilitation. It is important to note the predominant power differential between

the researcher and the participant, accentuated by the researcher's theory and knowledge regarding the project and the participants' lack of insight into how the research may affect them and their inability to protect themselves. Faugier maintains that this gap is particularly heightened in the case of powerless groups where those with limited skills in articulation, such as minority groups of people in crises or homeless, may be less able to judge the purpose of an investigation fully to anticipate the risks they might be taking (Faugier 1996). This inquiry accepts that biased positions on the part of the researcher very likely intrude to influence its direction. In accepting this, he adopts and seeks to apply a stance in social research, which Bryman presents, namely, the importance of recognising and acknowledging "that research cannot be value free but to ensure that there is no untrammelled incursion of values in the research process and to be self-reflective and so exhibit reflexivity about the part played by such factors" (Bryman, 2004:22).

The researcher concurs with the views expressed in *Code of Human Ethics* (2010) compiled by the British Psychological Society which underlines the importance of ensuring that: "every person from whom data are gathered for the purposes of research consents freely to the process on the basis of adequate information" (British Psychological Society, 2010:15). The researcher met the participants in the Action Research, and members of the Base Christian Communities in advance of the interviews to clarify the purpose of the research and to set a relaxed and informal tone from the start. E-mail and phone contact with the social justice activists was sufficient to establish a similar bond of trust and understanding between the researcher and each activist. Prior to the interviews or the Action Research programme commencing, each candidate was encouraged to give either verbal or written consent to participating in the research process and informed that they could opt out at any stage if they had concerns or anxieties. The researcher deemed it appropriate not to ask the candidate to sign a consent form believing that a rigid adherence to the concept of informed consent would inhibit the ensuing interaction and insert an unnecessary formality into proceedings. The 'Code of Human Ethics' underlines that the way in which consent is sought from people to participate in research should be appropriate to the research topic and design, and to the ultimate outputs and uses of the analysis: "The principle of proportionality should apply, such that the procedures for consent are proportional to the nature of participation and the risks involved" (British Psychological Society, 2010:15). The right to anonymity was duly respected throughout the course of this research and 2 of the social justice activists chose to conceal their names

from the findings that emerged in this inquiry. In collating and presenting case study findings a pseudonym is used for each of these 2 activists in order to assist anonymity. The social justice activists, members of Base Christian Communities and participants in the Action Research were consulted fully throughout the research process and encouraged to read the final draft of the relevant sections pertaining to their contribution to confirm the validity and accuracy of the findings. If participants requested specific changes to the original draft so that it reflected fully their insights and convictions, this was duly carried out.

As outlined in Section 2.5.4 (pp.44-45), Action Research is premised on the notion that the participants determine the course of action without knowing in advance the full consequences of their activity. The Action Learning Set in this instance initiated a series of events that would ultimately contribute to the formation of a Base Christian community in the city without anticipating at the outset the precise impact their initiatives would have. The researcher anticipated the general direction the discussions with those engaged in the Action Research programme would take in advance of meetings and envisaged a possible framework for the interventions that would follow these discussions so as to give purpose and direction to the series of meetings. To reveal particular outcomes prematurely would fundamentally change the character of the experience as an account of possible outcomes of the research would effectively render obsolete the contribution of the participants. It is incumbent on the researcher, therefore, to establish a rapport of trust and respect with each participant from the outset so that the participants know that they are integral to the process of defining the outcome of the research and that it is they who ultimately validate the new level of understanding that emerges through engaging in this process of action and reflection. The findings of the research, once compiled by the researcher, were e-mailed to each participant for their approval. In so doing, the researcher works within the ambit of what Zeni terms the “zone of accepted practice” and as such does not subject the participant to undue risk:

Action research involves practitioners studying their own professional practice and framing their own questions. Their research has the immediate goal to assess, develop or improve their practice. Such research activities belong to the daily process of good teaching. (Zeni, 1998:13)

2.6 Primary Research Approach

This chapter has focused on determining an appropriate philosophical and methodological approach for this study. As depicted in Figure 2.2, the interpretive paradigm is selected as the ontological and epistemological assumptions mirror the assumptions of the researcher and best suit the research propositions under review. An inductive, qualitative methodology is selected based on the philosophical assumptions.

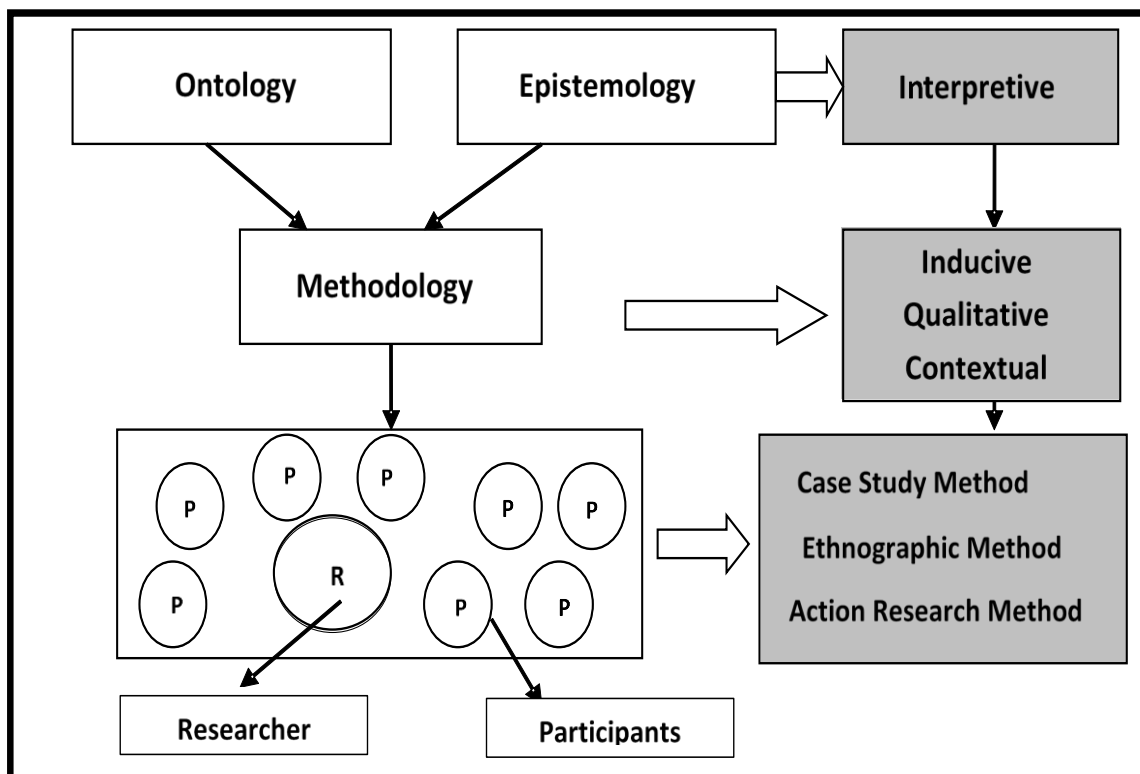


Figure 2.2 Philosophical, methodological and methods pertaining to the research

Having established the philosophical and methodological approach, the research design and methods process need to be examined. The case study selection process and action interventions need to be detailed in addition to analysis techniques. Therefore, this section will describe the primary research approach adopted for this research remaining true to the interpretive assumption presented earlier in this chapter.

2.6.1 Stage 1: Research Process and Design

A research design is the framework for a study which provides useful guidelines for collecting and analysing data. According to Yin:

A research design is an action plan for getting from here to there where here is the initial set of questions and there are the set of answers. (Yin, 2003:20)

Following the research approach proposed by Eisenhardt (1989) in building theory from case study research, this research comprises eight steps depicted in Figure 2.3 (p.55). This figure presents a general overview of the research design with more in-depth knowledge in the following sections. In commencing the research process and following a preliminary literature review, the research examines the paradigm of Church promoted in Liberation Theology and establishes the core theological understanding that gives credence and purpose to the activities of Base Christian Communities. This is in accordance with Eisenhardt who states that:

Without a research focus, it is easy to become overwhelmed by the volume of data... a priori specification of constructs ensures a firmer empirical grounding for the emergent theory. (Eisenhardt, 1989:536)

This thesis broadens the scope of theological inquiry to encompass the views of progressivist Western theologians who provide subsidiary insights on the themes emanating from the literature review. The effect is to corroborate a comprehensive picture of the underlying theological premise on which each Base Christian Community is founded. The researcher compiles the findings emanating from the case study of 10 social justice activists who each contribute to the understanding of the theological basis to these communities and offer a penetrating insight into the challenges facing the Church in Ireland at this time. The researcher then engages in ethnographic research among 2 Base Christian Communities, 1 Parish Cell group and 2 social justice groups in Ireland to ascertain the relevance of ecclesial model emanating from Latin America for the Church here. The Action Research that follows has the effect of consolidating the findings that have emerged through this inquiry by identifying practical guidelines that can give impetus to the process of initiating a Base Christian Community here. There is a tradition in grounded theory studies to make constant links between findings and literature and Melia's study offers a good example of the successful use of this approach (Melia 1987). Overlap

exists between entering the field and data analysis stages. This flexibility is viewed as 'planned opportunism' in line with Eisenhardt whereby the structure of the data collection remains the same:

An essential feature of theory building is a comparison of the emergent concepts theory, or hypotheses with the extant literature.
(Eisenhardt 1989:544)

Figure 2.3 (p.55) captures the underlying symmetry that exists between each strand of research in this theological inquiry. The researcher will use 'cognitive maps' to graphically illustrate the findings at key stages in this thesis as they facilitate a visual synthesis of the new concepts and ideas that are central to this research. Brinkman (2003) points out that Cognitive maps and other forms of conceptualisation tools like mind maps usually have a hierarchical structure and are developed using conventions, which makes them particularly useful for visualisation. The principle of these maps is that ideas should move from the abstract to the concrete. Webb and Cavern (2001) argue that cognitive maps are a useful tool for ensuring the broad range of views and perspectives of informants are represented, with the aim of reaching a common understanding or consensus. Northcott (1996) advocates the use of mapping as a tool for analyzing open-ended interview responses. He recommends cognitive maps as an expeditious method for handling the large volumes of data from interviews. In qualitative research, the raw data is broken down into themes and subsequently findings are derived. Patton (2002) claims that there is no formula for the analysis of qualitative data, only guidance, with the findings being unique to the investigator, yet remaining valid if methodologically sound techniques are used. Mays and Pope (2000) also advocate the use of cognitive maps for qualitative data analysis. They claim that researchers should familiarise themselves with the content, immersing themselves in the raw data before they begin to create cognitive maps. Subsequently they argue that researchers should identify key issues, concepts and themes from the raw data and label them into manageable chunks, linking themes or concepts and rearranging the data into '*charts*' containing the relevant data. Finally the researcher should map the chart to define the phenomena, find associations and provide explanations relating to the original research aims or questions. Figure 2.3 illustrates the essential interplay that exists between each phase of research and captures the effectiveness of cognitive maps in identifying an over-arching visual framework for collating and synthesising the ideas and concepts that surface in this inquiry.

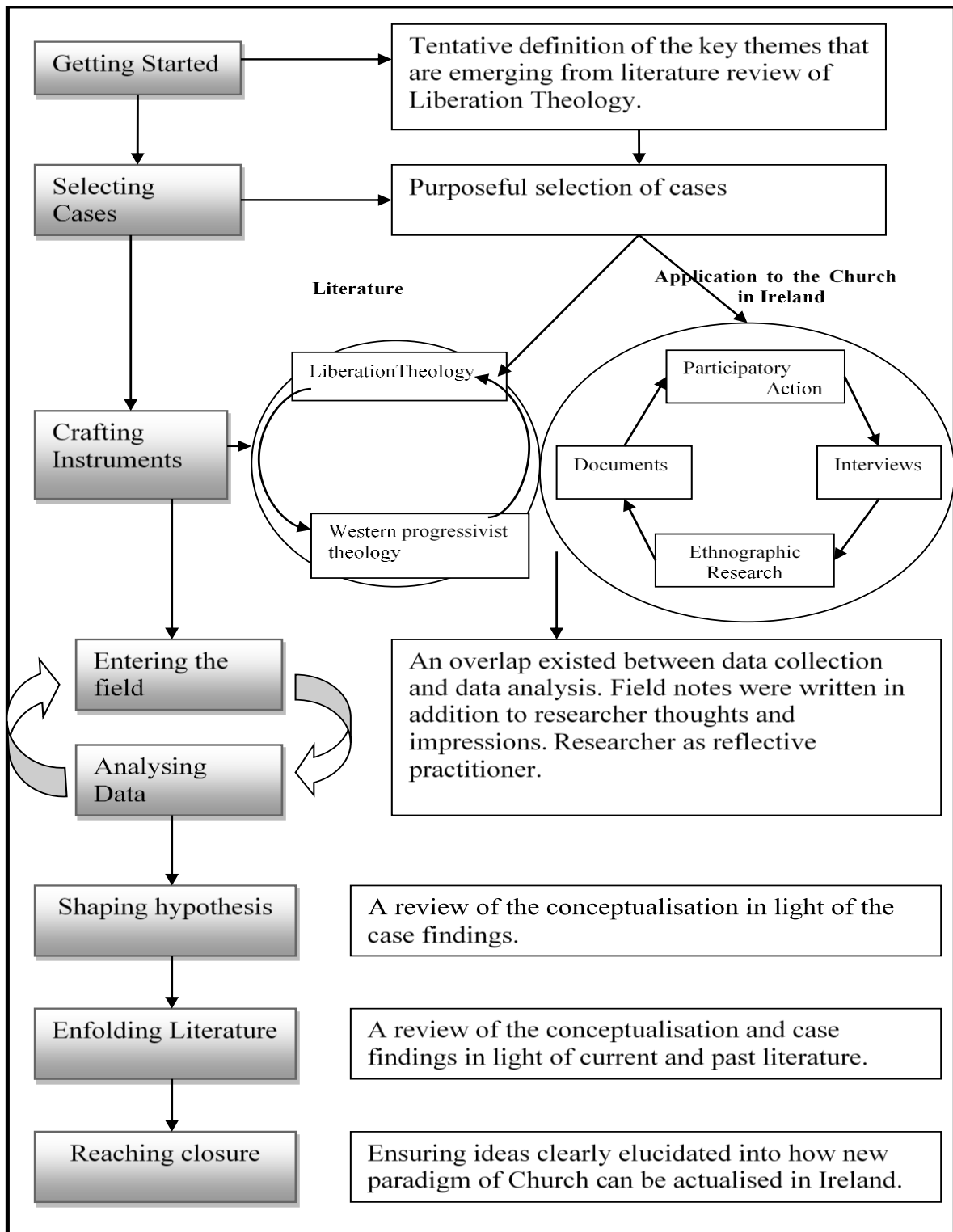


Figure 2.3 Research design adapted from Eisenhardt (1989:533)

2.6.2 Stage 2: Selection Criteria and Processing of Data for Case Study and Ethnographic Research

Case study methods, as discussed in Section 2.5.2 (pp.36-38), are used to gain in-depth understanding replete with meaning for the subject, focusing on process rather than outcome, on discovery rather than confirmation. 10 activists were selected by the researcher for analysis whereby each activist represents an individual case study. 5 of these candidates are ardent advocates of social justice and promote a more inclusive and compassionate vision of Church that meets the needs of the marginalised in Ireland today. 3 of the candidates have experienced first-hand the dynamism of the Church in Latin America during the 70s and 80s and offer a unique perspective on the challenges Liberation Theology poses for the Church in Ireland today. 2 lay female activists who campaign for greater involvement of women in the dynamic of the Church were also consulted to assess their perceptions on the reform that they propose for the Church here. This number of cases is deemed appropriate and in line with Eisenhardt who stated:

A number of 4 to 10 usually works well. With fewer than 4 cases, it is often difficult to generate theory with much complexity, and its empirical grounding is likely to be unconvincing. (Eisenhardt, 1989: 545)

Case selection is based on meeting the key criteria the most crucial being the unique perspective provided by each activist on the significance of the paradigm of Base Christian Community for the Church in Ireland. Therefore, regarding case selection for the case studies, each activist was selected in accordance with the snowball sampling outlined in Section 2.5.1 (pp.33-36) where preliminary inquiries and conversations with activists known to the researcher opened up a wider network of potential participants in the research inquiry. In this instance, the researcher conducted case studies with 2 social justice activists, McVerry and O' Halloran, and, through the interview process, was informed of other activists deemed to have a significant contribution to make to the inquiry. The criteria for selection of the case study candidates are clear: each candidate has experience of working alongside Base Christian Communities in Ireland or abroad and has their own insights and observations on the distinctive features of this paradigm of Church; each has been influenced by Liberation Theology and believe in the importance of promoting a more inclusive and more compassionate model of Church; each has a unique perspective on the immediate challenges facing the Church in Ireland. All efforts were made by the

researcher to work within the constraints of the time the candidates had to be interviewed and every effort was made to facilitate the interviewees. In most cases, the researcher travelled to the place of residence of the activists at a time previously arranged to suit both parties. In certain cases, the activists happened to be travelling to Waterford so interviews were planned to coincide with these visits. This follows Yin who stated:

In general, convenience, access and geographic proximity can be the main criteria for selecting cases ... allowing for a less structured and more prolonged relationship to develop between the interviewees and the case study investigator. (Yin, 2003: 79)

Following these interviews, the researcher met with members of 2 Base Christian Communities, 1 Parish Cell Group and 2 social justice groups in Ireland with a view to examining the dynamics involved in adapting this new model of Church to an Irish setting. The selection process again followed the snowball sampling technique, where discussions with the social justice activists helped to identify members from existing or past Base Christian Communities or social justice groups that could be useful in this research. The criteria for selection centred on two determining factors: the candidates have been directly involved in the activities of grassroots faith communities in Ireland and they have their own observations on what is required to inject new life into the process of renewal in the Church here at this time. As part of this ethnographic research, the researcher visited these communities at the home of one of the members in Fatima Mansions and Crumlin, Dublin and in Leixlip, Kildare. Other members from each community called during this day long visit to offer their own distinctive insight into the defining features of the model of Church that they participate in. The 3 visits happened in close proximity over the course of 2 weeks so that the researcher could integrate the findings from each visit into one reflective response to what he encountered. During each visit, the researcher conducted the interviews with each member quite informally in the company of the other members. This helped to relax each participant and took any unnecessary formality out of proceedings. At the end of each visit, the researcher was invited to participate in their community prayer and experience for himself the spirituality and the sense of belonging that is intrinsic to the identity of each community. The paradigm of Church under review will be termed 'small Christian community', as distinct from 'Base Christian Community', when viewed specifically in the Irish context (Chapters 5 and 6). The rationale behind this change in terminology is two-fold; to reflect how these people define the identity of their own

community and to capture the movement towards smaller, more meaningful experiences of Church that is evident in Ireland today. The ethnographic research conducted with ‘ATD Fourth World’ and ‘Partners in Faith’ provided a unique insight into how the preferential option for the poor that underscores the spirituality of Liberation Theology translates into an Irish setting (See Section 2.5.3, pp.39-40).

Interviews often represent a compromise between more structured and quantitative data-collection methods and in-depth qualitative methods such as those thus far described in this study (See Burnard in Section 2.4.4, pp.29-30). As an independent method, they are utilised in this study to strengthen the research validity and reliability. Semi-structured interviews are utilised in this research with the aim of developing an understanding of the respondent’s world (Easterby-Smith et al, 2002:87). The researcher clarifies a series of issues to be explored with each participant in advance of each interview (Patton, 1990:280). The reason for this is the researcher’s insistence that each issue is covered in its totality and to ensure that the relevant data is gathered. At the start of each interview among the social justice activists, members of Base Christian Communities and social justice groups, the researcher encouraged the interviewees to speak freely about their understanding of what it means to be Church today as it provided the necessary context on which their views can be explored. The question structure attached in Appendix 1 (pp.330-331) is intentionally loose, allowing for variations to emerge on a case-by-case basis. Regarding case duration, the activists were interviewed over a two hour period and the researcher spent considerably more time with each Base Christian Community and the Parish Cell group so as to experience the specific dynamics unique to each community and to capture the underlying premise on which their community was built.

The focus throughout was on ascertaining their perceptions on the applicability of the model of Church promoted in Liberation Theology for the Church here in an environment that was informal yet conducive to probing dialogue and reflection. In line with Burnard and Eisenhardt in Section 2.4.4 (pp.29-32), the researcher first recorded the observations and insights of the participants in hand written interview transcripts and later ordered their ideas into dominant ideas or “meaning sets” and filed them onto a NYivo software package. This process was always implemented within 24 hours of the case study or ethnographic research being carried out so as to fully capture the overriding convictions and perceptions whilst the material was still fresh. This format facilitated an ongoing

attempt by the researcher to ‘pool together’ the collective wisdom emanating from the candidates into distinct meaning units and thereby make it possible to decipher their relevance and significance to the inquiry. Some participants expressed interest in monitoring the researcher’s progress and asked for the literature review and findings from the inquiry to be forwarded on in advance of publication. Each participant was given the opportunity to respond to the researcher’s findings from these interviews so as to safeguard the accuracy of their insights and observations as delineated in the ethical considerations outlined in Section 2.5.6 (pp.49-51). The researcher, in turn, accepted the invitation from some of the candidates to participate with them in ongoing projects and has enjoyed building on the friendship and mutual respect that was established during the interview process.

2.6.3 Stage 3: Shared Dialogue between Facilitator and Participants in Action Research

Participatory Action Research has emerged in recent years as a significant methodology for intervention, development and change within social networks. Such learning sets are invaluable for the creation of relational capabilities as research suggests owner/managers prefer an action learning style based on ‘learning by doing’ as opposed to traditional teaching methodologies (Moran, Finestra Report). The most beneficial aspect of Action Research (action learning) is in its iterative process of problem diagnosis, action intervention, and reflective learning, by the researcher and participants.

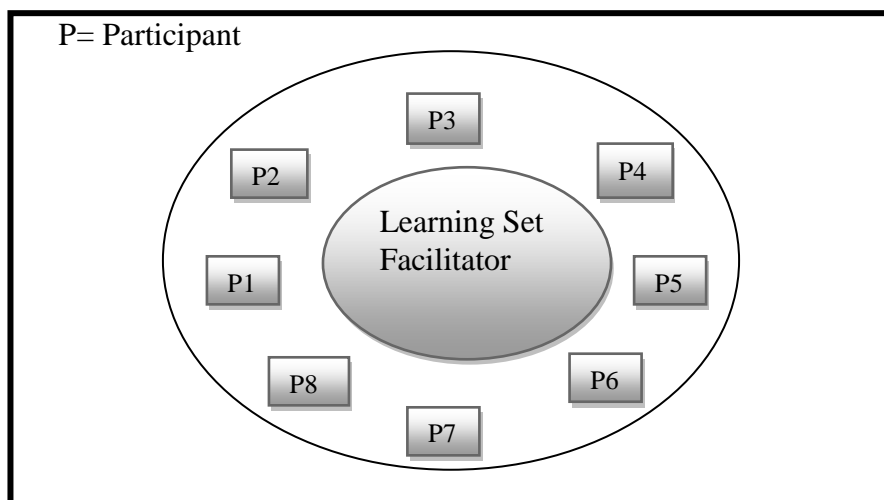


Figure 2.4 Learning set – example

Figure 2.4 (p.59) outlines the structure of the learning sets/networks that are utilised in this research project. The learning set facilitator (the researcher) in the centre acts as an external assistant to ensure that the focus of the sessions remains on the appropriate dimension and to ensure that each voice was heard. Concept discussion is followed by the group determining the goals they would like to achieve in the session. Action is then followed by reflection and future action as the cycle continues. The classic Action Research design contains six to eight participants in a set (Pedler et al., 2005). This number ensures all voices can be heard, gives great variety of experiences to the group, means that all options and opportunities are examined and current thinking is challenged allowing for each person to reflect upon their own strategies and plans (See Coghlan, Revans and McGill and Beaty, p.45). Each participant selected for the Action Research programme has an ongoing commitment to projects that bring the Gospel to life in real and palpable ways in their environs. As such, they may not necessarily be content within the existing Church structures in Ireland and are open to exploring new ways of translating the world of the Gospel into contemporary life in Ireland. Some have an allegiance to the Church yet recognise the need to re-interpret the existing model of Church in light of the shortcomings that have been exposed in this model in recent years. Others are involved in initiatives beyond the domain of the institutional Church that are already having an impact on their communities. They all share a willingness to learn from the themes that have emerged from the review of the ecclesiology of liberation and are open to envisaging new ways of giving renewed impetus and direction to the activity of the Church in their immediate surroundings.

A critical friend may also be present allowing for field notes and data analysis scripts to be verified (See Appendix 2, pp.332-337). Critical friends, usually peers or colleagues, often push researchers to another level of understanding as they ask researchers to make explicit what they may understand on a more tacit level (Anderson, Herr and Nihlen, 1994). The meetings with the participants in the Action Research programme commenced when the themes from the Literature Review were collated and the interviews with the social justice activists and the members of Base Christian Communities were complete. Three such meetings took place and the researcher interviewed each participant in their work environment between the Action Learning Set meetings to review the impact of their efforts to implement new initiatives within their own communities. The venue for these meetings was The Edmund Rice Heritage Centre, Mount Sion, Waterford. The spiritual

and reflective ambience of the place, the accessibility of the Edmund Rice Chapel, the catering facilities and the multi-media meeting rooms all helped to facilitate a purposeful yet relaxed atmosphere. In advance of these series of meetings, the researcher called to each of the participants in their own environs with a view to clarifying the purpose of the research and addressing any concerns or queries they might have in relation to their involvement in the inquiry. It is incumbent on the researcher to establish bonds of trust and respect from the beginning and put the candidates at ease (See Section 2.5.6, pp.49-51). This relaxed association between the researcher and the participant was intrinsic to the dynamic of the Action Research programme and facilitated real engagement and respectful listening throughout the process.

Prior to the first meeting, the researcher devised creative ways of presenting the themes that emerged in the course the literature review and prepared a power point presentation with accompanying music and visual footage to capture the various characteristics of the model of Base Christian Community that had invigorated the Church in Latin America. This included a series of visual images compiled by the researcher from his visits to the various Base Christian Communities and from online footage that captured the distinctive elements of a Base Christian Community (Appendix 2, pp.338-341). This presentation was accompanied by music and it provided the appropriate backdrop for the discussion which was to follow and also helped to facilitate a relaxed yet purposeful environment from the start of the Action Research programme. Alongside each visual image were key quotes compiled by the researcher that captured the underlying conviction that gave meaning to the activity depicted in the image. This had the effect of acquainting each candidate with the theological understanding that animated the activities of the Base Christian Community and also helped to establish the researcher's own credibility. In essence, this first phase of the initial meeting in effect became a prior action learning experience, a blend of spiritual reflection, critical analysis and creative exploration that provided the stimulus for the specific strategy devised by team towards the end of this meeting for promoting a Base Christian Community in city.

This followed naturally on to the next phase of the first meeting which involved clearly delineating the problem, namely the need for a more authentic model of Church in Ireland, and to explore how the understanding of Church articulated in Liberation Theology could help to address this problem. Central to the process of Action Research conducted in this

inquiry was the emphasis placed on the contribution of each participant to the task of mapping out a new orientation for the Church in Ireland. Critically, the researcher argues that the dynamic that the group create in the course of these discussions must be allowed to enlighten the substance of the activities and interventions that follow. Otherwise, the researcher runs the risk of imposing something with scant regard for the contribution that each participant has to make as underlined in the 'Ethical Considerations' (Section 2.5.6, pp.49-51). The facilitator must exercise a wide array of skills from listening to probing to verbalising the richness of what has been shared by the participants. Yet, the researcher must never lose sight of the fundamental issue or problem that the group attempts to respond to, namely the potential of the Base Christian Community to give renewed impetus to the Church in Ireland today. The concluding phase of this first meeting entailed devising a specific strategy by the Action Learning Set that would help to give impetus to the formation of a Base Christian Community in Waterford City. The team decided on a course of action and each member took responsibility for one aspect of the preparation that was necessary to bring their shared objectives to completion. The specific details intrinsic to each task are more clearly defined in Section 5.4.2, pp.262-265 and Appendix 2, pp.333-336).

2.6.4 Stage 4: Devising the Interventions in the Action Research Programme

Reflection is a continual part of the process of Action Research and can occur at multiple levels. Participants are encouraged to reflect on their own past experiences in addition to post intervention/action ones. This synergy between the reflective discussion and an exploration of what is revealed through experience becomes particularly pertinent over the second and third meetings as the participants reflect on their efforts to actualise this model of Church in their own locality. At the critical reflection stage, each participant is encouraged to bring concrete experiences back to an individual level and assimilate their newly acquired insights and perceptions into their established views and assumptions. Lonergan captures the importance of this continuous cycle of reflection and action succinctly:

There is a cyclic and cumulative process that results when situations give rise to insights revealing new possibilities. New possibilities lead to new courses of action, new courses of action produce new situations, and new situations give rise to further insights revealing still further possibilities, and so on: a cyclic and cumulative process. (Lonergan in Lonergan, Croken and Doran ed., 2004:344)

It is imperative that the facilitator formulates the interventions in consultation with the participants and in response to their combined efforts to initiate a course of action which in this case created the conditions for the formation of a Base Christian Community in the city (See Section 2.5.4, pp.43-45). The interventions in this instance follow on from a specific course of action that helped to ‘fine-tune’ the sensitivities of the participants towards the elements that they deemed essential to the evolution of a Base Christian Community once it was established. Essentially, the reflective response arises out of a prescribed course of action which in turn precipitates a new understanding of what is required ensure the longevity of the original action. It is incumbent on the researcher to allow the participants to freely discuss their perception of the issue. This requires a skilled facilitator as the whole objective of structuring a research design is to get better quality information. Trust is the cornerstone of Action Research; trust that the facilitator has the needs of the group at heart, has confidence in the inalienable value of the contribution of each member and is conscious of the need not to reduce these encounters to a purely academic practice for publication. Trust is also essential between participants for open problem sharing as it is only through airing problems freely that the ensuing issues can be discussed and responded to in a purposeful and enlightened manner by the group. Thus, a careful negotiating and establishing of trusted relationships is probably the key ingredient in building a research endeavour that works for all involved (Herr & Anderson, 2005).

The participants in the Action Learning Set are integral to the process of defining the interventions that emerge from this inquiry. The interventions are arrived at through a collaborative process between the researcher and the Action Learning Set. In advance of the final meeting, it was clear that the interventions would revolve around 3 guiding principles that are central both to Liberation Theology and to the work and beliefs of the activists and members of Base Christian Communities interviewed:

- Listening to the voice of the people- A clear and honest critique of the failures of the current model of Church in Ireland.
- Evidence of Hope- the possibilities that the model of Base Christian Community opens up for the Church here.
- Liberating praxis- prayer and action. Initiatives aimed at effecting change and drawing spiritual inspiration from the weak and the vulnerable.

It is important that the facilitator makes the connection between the views expressed by the participants and the themes emanating from Liberation Theology that were explored in the first meeting, always with an eye to relating the practice problems to the theory. The facilitator must ensure that no one person dominates the discussion and must be prepared to shift focus to quieter participants if this were to happen. Equally, the facilitator will need to 'go deeper' when the occasion arises so as to fully capture the richness of what is being said. The key to the success of these discussions is to create an environment of mutual respect, where the participants are at ease and they know that their contributions are valued and respected by all. Above all, they must believe that their views can shape and mould the direction of the series of meetings and influence the initiatives that follow as a result of their encounters together.

The Liberation Theologian, Jon Sobrino, has had a profound influence on the researcher's approach to formulating these interventions. For Sobrino, the real meaning of faith only becomes apparent when Christians work actively to create a new order in the world, an order that reflects the values of love and justice promoted by Jesus. Sobrino argues that the task of theology and indeed all religious reflection is to: "transform the real world and at the same time recover the meaning of the faith. The task, therefore, is not to understand the faith differently, but to allow a new faith to spring from a new practice." (Sobrino, 1984:20-21) Meaning is arrived at not through abstract reflection on ideals that may never be realised or in reflecting on the negation of those ideals, but in and through a reflective response to making these ideals a reality in our world. Truth is reached in the process of bringing our faith to bear on those who live in the margins of history; people previously denied their rights and their voice. In those on the margins, the economically poor, the weak and the alienated, we recognise the source of our inspiration.

2.6.5 Stage 5: Becoming a Reflective Practitioner

Action Research gives precedence to the importance of reflection on experience as a means of ascertaining knowledge: "Knowledge is continuously derived from and tested out in the experiences of the learner" (Kolb 1984:27). This is in accord with Dewey's principle that: "the continuity of experience means that every experience both takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after" (Dewey, 1938:35). Daudelin (1996:38) reiterates this view believing that there are

two key conditions for learning from experience, “developing insights from past events and applying them to future actions.” Likewise, Lonergan alludes to the new understandings and perceptions that come from reflecting on experience. In his view, our reflective faculties propel us beyond the immediacy of our experience in search of truth, which, once discovered, draws us back to that same experience to view it from a new perspective. Ultimately, Lonergan maintains that experience is the bedrock on which the pursuit of wisdom and enlightenment must be grounded:

What is experienced comes to be investigated. What is investigated comes to be understood. What is understood can be formulated intelligently. What is formulated intelligently can be checked. What is checked satisfactorily is found sufficiently grounded to be affirmed. (Lonergan in Lonergan, Croken and Doran ed., 2004:124)

In his journal article ‘Theological Foundations of Action Research for Learning and Teaching’ (2011), Ralph Norman encourages the researcher, as student, to engage directly in the educational process in a way that enables him/her to shape and influence the ultimate goal towards which the inquiry is moving. Norman argues that Action Research facilitates a process that effectively allows this to happen, creating the conditions wherein the student “takes possession of the transformative capacity of education by providing an account of their own subjective encounter with learning” (Norman, 2011:118). Throughout the discourse on education in this inquiry, the emphasis rests decisively on the importance of reflecting on the reality of the practice at hand, turning that experience into a vital source of learning and resulting in further action to keep the wheels of change in motion. According to Schön:

A practitioner’s reflection can serve as a corrective to over-learning. Through reflection, he can surface and criticize the tacit understandings that have grown up around the repetitive experiences of a specialized practice, and can make new sense of the situations of uncertainty or uniqueness which he may allow himself to practice. (Schön, 1983:61)

The researcher participates in the very process that all the participants are engaged in, bringing the interventions to bear on his own experience of Church and reflecting on his endeavours to do so. Central to this phase of the research will be an exploration of the effectiveness of these interventions when they are adapted to the mechanisms of ‘The Omagh Waterford Peace Choir’, a Base Christian Community that the researcher is personally engaged in. The researcher becomes a reflective practitioner, elucidating the

value of these interventions once they are actualised into the life of a specific small Christian community. In his book, *The Reflective Practitioner- how professionals think in action* (1983), Schön offers important insights that are invaluable to those committed to Action Research as a means towards arriving at key truths in their respective fields. Practitioners have an innate capacity to reflect on life and to draw their own conclusions, often without being aware of their ability to bring order and meaning to the many imponderables they encounter in life:

Practitioners themselves often reveal a capacity for reflection on their intuitive knowing in the midst of action and sometimes use this capacity to cope with the unique, uncertain, and conflicted situations of practice. (Schön, 1983:8-9)

Reflecting on action is the ultimate way of verifying the truths which are considered central to the research in question. Oakeshott's philosophy of education underscores the importance of creating a dynamic that "forces the practitioners of an activity to become self-conscious, putting them on the road to becoming self-critical where they may undergo the philosophers own experience of puzzlement" (Oakeshott in Fuller, 2001:xxvi). Equally, Freire's gives primacy to a mode of critical thinking that reconciles the abstract world of cognitive deliberation with a reflective yet tangible response to the pressing challenges that people have to contend with in each new historical epoch. Freire contends that education must promote and nurture a method of reflection which creates an indivisible union between the world and the people, paving the way for "thinking which perceives reality as process, as transformation, rather than as a static entity... which does not separate itself from action, but constantly immerses itself in temporality without fear of the risks involved" (Freire, 1970:73). Without this continued symmetry between learning and experience, between knowledge and the context in which this knowledge is actualised, the danger is that learning becomes disconnected from the world. Otherwise, the theories may translate well on a conceptual and abstract level and remain detached from the real world wherein they derive their meaning:

If we separate thinking from doing, seeing thought only as a preparation for action and action only as an implementation of thought, then it is easy to believe that when we step into the separate domain of thought we will become lost in an infinite regress of thinking about thinking. (Schön, 1983:280)

2.6.6 Stage 6: Data Collection Options-Measuring Change

Data analysis consists of examining, categorising, tabulating, testing or otherwise recombining evidence to address proposition of a study (Yin, 2003:109). According to Eisenhardt (1989:539) analysing data is the heart of building theory from case studies, however, analysing case study evidence is especially difficult because the strategies and techniques have not been well defined (Yin, 2003:109). Considering the ontological stance of this research, the ultimate goal of the analysis is to allow the world of literature and practice to coalesce; to allow the knowledge derived from the relevant literature to give direction to practice and in turn be influenced and illuminated by efforts to give expression to this knowledge. This synergy between the findings that surface in the interviews of both activists and members of Base Christian Communities, in the Action Research and in the themes that have come to light in the literature review is an essential component in the research as it allows the researcher to draw conclusions on how this model of Church that has emerged in Latin America can be actualised in Ireland. Equally, the data to be considered following critical reflection from the participants in the Action Research programme will be a vital component in tying the strands of the research together. Coghlan captures the demands this places on the researcher succinctly:

Since action research is research *in* action, it comprises iterative cycles of gathering data, feeding it back to those concerned, analysing the data, planning action, taking action and evaluating, leading to further data gathering and so on. So there is a continuing spiral of steps, each of which is composed of a circle of planning, action and fact-finding about the result of the action. (Coghlan, 2008:216)

A striking feature of research to build theory from case studies is the frequent overlap of data analysis with data collection (See Section 2.4.4, p.30). Field notes, documentary sources and interview scripts are an important means of accomplishing this overlap for the purpose of this research study. Through regular review of the data, important issues raised by activists and members of Base Christian Communities are identified and ordered into distinct meaning units and filed accordingly on an NYivo software package (See Section 2.4.4, pp.30-32). An essential feature of theory building is a comparison of the emerging concepts, theory, or hypotheses with the extant literature (Eisenhardt, 1989:544). Hence the final stage of analysing data in this research is to relate the findings to the themes that have emerged from the literature review to the lived expression of this vision of Church in

Ireland today. Essentially, the researcher must allow the findings from the various routes of research to converge (See Figure 2.3, p.55). It is this pool of learning drawn from the literature review, the interviews with activists and the extant literature on the European response to the themes emanating from Latin America that gives focus and direction to the Action Research.

The data collection decisions made by the researcher will determine the clarity and substance of all the information to be collated from the interviews with the ten social justice activists, members from the 3 Base Christian Communities and 2 social justice groups and the eight participants in the Action Research. With regard to the Action Research, the researcher insists on having an observer present at all the group meetings so as to authenticate the reflections and comments made by the researcher in response to these meetings. The observer, Br. Stephen Hale, will write up his own response to each of these meetings, recording the central dynamics of the discussions and give his own account of the key findings that emerged in the course of the discussions (See Appendix 2, pp.332-337). The purpose here is two-fold; firstly, to validate the researcher's interpretation of events so as to safeguard the impartiality of these findings, and, secondly, to offer an interesting objective assessment of these findings. The researcher too will keep a detailed account of the key findings and observations that emerge in the course of discussions. All the interviews with the participants before, during and after these series of meetings were recorded by Brother Steve. It is incumbent on the researcher to monitor and critically analyse the progression of thought that takes place in the minds of each of the participants and to assess the key components in their experience that have contributed to this knowledge. The researcher can give the necessary direction and encouragement in this process, but must nevertheless remain objective, recording all findings with an emphasis on the impact on the participants understanding of the subject matter rather than his own. The researcher introduces the understanding of Church articulated in Liberation Theology and will trace the transferability of model of Base Christian Community in the ensuing action and reflection of the participants. Over time, the researcher identifies the key elements of change in the thought processes of the participants as they seek to learn from their experience of giving impetus to the formation of this model of Christian community in the city. It is then that the interventions are devised by the Action Learning Set and they discern the guiding principles central to the evolution of each new Base Christian Community.

It is imperative that the researcher hones in on how the views of each of the participants change and develop in response to their experience and assesses the impact of this change on their previously stated beliefs and assumptions. With this in mind, each participant is encouraged to keeping their own diary, recording their response to each new experience and tracing the impact these experiences have on their previously held assumptions. This facilitated a process that enabled the researcher to consult with individual participants as he was compiling his findings if he required any additional quotation and comment to substantiate the specific idea or observation under inquiry. In essence, the researcher endeavored to grasp in its entirety the new understandings that emerged in the aftermath of the interview when both the researcher and participant had the opportunity to give a more considered and reflective response to the question examined in the initial inquiry. The process is as important as the end result as the process can shape and influence future behavior and practice. Equally important, the researcher should devise ways of measuring the longitudinal effects of this learning, re-visiting participants with a view to establishing the long term impact of initiatives that were taken.

2.6.7 Stage 7: Safeguarding Research Reliability

The goal of reliability is to minimise the errors and biases (Yin, 2003:37). This section of the thesis details the several proactive steps taken by the researcher to actively combat the popular attacks on the validity and reliability of case studies. The note taking that is essential at each stage of this researched is presented to the interviewees for accuracy. Given that their observations and insights help to define the new understanding of Church that emerges over the course of the research, every effort is made to validate these findings with the interviewees so that they accurately reflect their considered views on the issues under inspection as outlined in Section 2.5.6 (pp.49-51).

Internal validity, or credibility, refers to the establishment of a phenomenon in a credible way (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). In terms of internal validity, the researcher clearly argues that this study was situated in the interpretive paradigm due to its ontological, epistemological and methodological stance. Social exchange theory, due to its focus on the embeddedness of ties and reciprocity, was selected as the theoretical lens through which to view the impact the themes that emerge in the course of the literature review can have in Ireland. In the process of collecting and analysing data, the triangulation technique is used

to enhance the credibility of the research findings (See Figure 2.5, p.71). According to Cohen and Manion, in social sciences triangulation:

... attempts to map out, or explain more fully, the richness and complexity of human behaviour by studying it from more than one standpoint. (Cohen and Manion (1986: 254)

In qualitative research, triangulation aims to enhance the credibility and validity of the results. Altrichter et al. (1996: 117) say that: “It [triangulation] gives a more detailed and balanced picture of the situation” (Altrichter et al., 1996: 117).

External validity, or transferability, refers to examining how applicable the research findings are to another setting or group (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). In this case, the application of multiple case studies offered a base for generalising. Although the participants differed in their aspects of their beliefs and in the nature of their work yet common themes emerged between them. The researcher achieved transferability in his research design through an in-depth description of the interventions utilised and through the use of an interview protocol.

Reliability is concerned with consistency in the research. To ensure reliability, an independent observer is present for each meeting with the participants in the Action Research. Interviews are transcribed by the observer, Br. Stephen Hale, through a process that allowed him note the contributions as they were articulated at the meetings and then combine them with his own observations once each meeting was complete. This allowed the interviewer to concentrate solely on what was being said, rather than being continuously distracted by note-taking. In this manner, the researcher is in a position to further probe areas of interest, and discover the full wealth of wisdom within the contribution of each participant. This is also facilitated by the open ended interview instrument and flexibility in the action research sessions.

Objectivity or conformability relates to the neutrality of the research (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). In recognising that the researcher, due to his epistemological stance, cannot totally eliminate his bias, the researcher has adopted strategies to provide a balance for bias in his data analysis and interpretation. The use of both multiple case studies and multiple participants enhance the objectivity of this research. During the analysis phase, findings are discussed with all of the participants in the Action Research process and indeed

formulated in full, taking cognisance of the views expressed by each participant. Additionally, the independent observer followed the trail of evidence established by the researcher during the data collection and analysis phases of the research study.

Tests	Methods Employed	Phase of research in which tactic occurs
Internal validity (Credibility)	Researcher's assumptions, worldview and theoretical orientation Triangulation	Research design Data collection and data analysis
External validity (Transferability)	Predetermined questions. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set Interventions • Interview protocol Cross-case analysis and cross- country analysis Specific procedure of coding and analysis Compare evidence with the related literature	Research design Data analysis Data analysis Discussion
Objectivity (Conformability)	Use multiple sources of evidence Establish trail of evidence Key informant review	Data collection Data collection Data analysis

Figure 2.5 Interview case study tactics for internal validity, external validity, reliability and objectivity

Source: Based on Eisenhardt (1989, Linlcon and Guba (1985), Merriam (1988), Miles and Huberman (1994), Patton (1990), Yin (1994)

2.7 Research Considerations

Some ethical issues were prevalent which included respect for research participants, prevention of harm, assurances of confidentiality or anonymity, and maintenance of privacy (See Section 2.5.6, pp.49-51). In the case of this research, participant consent was both negotiated and evolutionary, that is, consent was sought before and during the study rather than agreed as a one-off contractual event prior to commencement of the research.

A further research consideration for the researcher was to ensure a balance in the learning sessions to ensure that the material was neither too theoretical, hindering participant understanding, nor too practical thus not contributing to scientific knowledge. Setting the balance between participation and observation in the learning is also a difficult task. This makes the role of the independent observer all the more important. In translating a model of Church that has been effective in another continent to an Irish context, researchers must be aware of the effects that actors, outside of the control setting, will have on the findings. To this end, the researcher must ensure that he has a full and accurate perception of the events as described by the participants and that extensive and probing records of all interviews and on-the-spot visits are kept.

2.8 Concluding Summary

The objective of this research is to explore the theological understanding that underpins the model of Church promoted in Liberation Theology and to illustrate how the defining features of the Base Christian Community can be transferred to an Irish context. The success of the research depends in no small measure on achieving this equilibrium between theory and practice, between the richness of the theological insight under review and the very real and pressing challenges facing the Church in Ireland today. To this end, the researcher follows the interpretive paradigm, recognising the importance of moving beyond empirical means of interpreting reality and acknowledging the layers of meaning that are contained within the societal interactions that define our human existence. In so doing, the researcher gives due recognition to the capacity of humans to interpret their experience in a meaningful and intelligible manner. The research is founded on the belief that human experience cannot be confined to what is quantifiable by empirical scrutiny alone and reflects the human quest to attribute meaning and value to the world of human interaction.

The research examines the ecclesiological vision promoted in Liberation Theology and critiques the possibilities this dynamic of Christian community presents to the Church's mission in the world today. The Literature Review will form the necessary backdrop for all subsequent reflection, and this in turn will be enlightened by extant literature relating to the European, American and Irish literary response to the theological premise on which the Base Christian Community is founded. The case studies with Irish activists already inspired by Liberation Theology will allow the researcher to explore the challenges facing the Church in Ireland at this time and to underline the importance of envisaging an alternative to the prevailing hierarchical model of Church. A critical component in the methodology deployed in this thesis is the emphasis on ethnographic research among members of communities and social justice groups in Ireland who illustrate how the model of Church promoted in Liberation Theology can be adapted to an Irish setting. Each of these phases of methodology will ultimately guide the Action Research programme and facilitate a process that enables the researcher, along with the participants in this programme, to come to a new level of understanding into the specific challenges involved in giving impetus to the promotion of Base Christian Communities in Ireland today. The effect is to extrapolate new insights and theories, drawn not just from a wealth of literature but from the concerted efforts of individuals committed to giving concrete expression to these insights in their communities. Ultimately, the research endeavours to give greater theological legitimacy to each defining element of a Base Christian Community and to capture the enduring relevance of this ecclesial paradigm for the Church in Ireland.

Chapter 3: Liberation Ecclesiology – Base Christian Community

Chapter 3: Liberation Ecclesiology – Base Christian Community

3.1 Introduction: the Emergence of the Base Christian Community

Over the past fifty years, a new style of Church has emerged across Latin America that has empowered the poor in their pursuit of liberation. Given the Spanish name *Comunidades Eclesiales de Base*, this cluster of small Christian communities comprise of the people at ‘the base’ of society, as opposed to those who occupy positions closer to the pinnacle of power on the social pyramid. Leonardo Boff acclaims the dynamism that is palpable on the grassroots among people once voiceless in society who have discovered innovative ways of translating the transforming power of the Gospel into their struggle for justice: “The periphery is the vessel of hope, the bearer of the future... Slowly, stubbornly, faith is taking flesh in our countries and acquiring a new face. A new way of being Christian is being tested” (Boff, 1989:8). Lay people are now being trained and empowered in their local communities to meet the spiritual, religious and pastoral needs of the people, and through this process, people are beginning to think in radically new ways about the Church and social justice. Boff maintains that the emergence of Base Christian Communities (CEBs) reveal a significant shift from the traditional paradigm of Church and accelerates in the cut and thrust of history the advancement towards all that God intends for humanity:

On the outskirts of the cities, in little villages, in the immense hinterland where a priest is almost never seen, the lowly people gather with their coordinator to hear and celebrate the message of liberation... The Church universal, sacrament of the Reign, is taking shape and form before our very eyes (Boff, 1989:200).

Gustavo Gutiérrez’ role in defining a theological rationale that gives credence to these communities is indispensable and his contribution unique. Born in Lima, Peru in 1928, Gutiérrez’ life and writings were to be profoundly influenced by the wretched social conditions that many people in Peru had to endure. Yet, it was the resilient spirit of those subjected to oppression and their defiance in the face of injustice and persecution that was to make a lasting impression on him and leave an indelible imprint on his theology. Gutiérrez believes that the people are forging a new paradigm of Christian community that enables them to channel their collective energies to surmount the intolerable social conditions that they have to endure: “The support of the community is essential for the

crossing of the desert. So true is this that only in community can one travel this road” (Gutiérrez, 2005:133). Gutiérrez reveals how the love that binds the community is not tame and ineffectual but something that is sustained within the community and reverberates outwards to become a stimulus for radical societal and political change:

Only in community can faith be lived in love. Only in community can faith be celebrated and deepened. Only in community can faith be lived in a life of fidelity to the Lord and solidarity with all men and women.... This proclamation of the gospel, summoning us together into ecclesia, takes place from within an option of real and active solidarity with the interests and struggles of the poor, the exploited classes. (Gutiérrez, 1983:67)

The stamp of the suffering inflicted on so many innocents throughout Central America leaves its imprint on the theologians of liberation and strengthens their resolve to articulate a vision of Church that reflects the needs and rights of the voiceless and the downtrodden in society. Jean Luis Segundo’s ecclesiology gives recognition to the unwavering faith of these people in the face of great destitution. For him, their testimony to the Gospel gives the Church “a sense of urgency and deep relevance” it never had before, and “a wondrous and terrifying presence of Christ, one that is far more suitable for the universe than his continuing physical presence on earth” (Segundo, 1973:102-103). Jon Sobrino’s theology too draws much of its inspiration from the unflinching resolve of the people at a time of great upheaval and persecution in El Salvador to create a more just and equitable model of community. In the concluding words of Sobrino’s book *Archbishop Romero - Memories and Reflections* (1990), Sobrino acclaims the Archbishop Romero’s solidarity with the persecuted people of El Salvador and calls for his legacy to endure through the witness of those who follow in his path:

I should like to conclude by asking God to make the spirit of Archbishop Romero more and more present and effective among us. If we follow in his footsteps we shall further the cause of justice and peace, truth and love... we shall defend the cause of a people that Archbishop Romero loved so much that he gave his life for them. (Sobrino, 1990:201)

In her book, *Communities of Resistance and Solidarity: A Feminist Theology of Liberation* (1985), Sharon Welch underlines how this evolving movement in theological inquiry has developed in correspondence with the momentum that is being generated in communities of the poor across Latin America and gives legitimacy to their struggle for freedom and

justice: “Liberation theology is not based in the academy, in the study of texts or a specific literature; it is based in actual communities in the concrete experience of women and men struggling to build a new world” (Welch, 1985:33). Welch acclaims the creative dynamism of the people and their capacity to project beyond the impoverishment of their surroundings: “Their vision of this new world is forged in the context of a community of faith, a community that appropriates the Christian tradition in the context of political and social struggle” (Welch, 1985:33). McGovern captures the striking optimism and defiance that is palpable in Base Christian Communities and acknowledges the role Liberation Theology has played in strengthening the resolve of people once consigned to the fringes of society to effect change in the world:

The message of liberation theology and the development of base communities, on the other hand, have already made it possible for many poor to experience a new sense of dignity, a new awareness of God’s special love for them, and an ability to work in solidarity to achieve significant social goals at community levels. (McGovern, 1989:231)

Boff reveals how the shortage of priests in communities across Latin America provided the stimulus to explore a dynamic of Church that effectively placed the responsibility of responding to the needs of the faithful back in the hands of the people. Some parishes had two priests to cater for 80,000 people. These communities had to find innovative ways of keeping the faith alive from within the dynamics of their own group without losing their connection with the institutional Church: “Without these ministers, communities of faith are left to themselves, and run the risk of falling apart and disappearing” (Boff, 1985:125). Regan illustrates how the shortage of priests has precipitated an era of great change in how the Church operates in the world:

Ironically it is the lack of priests to say Mass which has led to small communities celebrating their own liturgy of the world on Sundays and discovering some of the roles denied them during centuries of clericalism; it is from these communities, celebrating their own life, work and union in Christ that deep liturgical renewal may be hoped for. (Regan, 1976:850)

The Latin American Episcopate endorsed the model of Church that was being promoted at the grassroots across Latin America when they met in Medellin, Colombia in 1968 and in Puebla de los Angeles, Mexico in 1979 and recognised the role the laity were playing in giving renewed impetus to their communities, and, by extension, to the wider mission of

the universal Church. The Bishops in Medellin saw in these Christian Base Communities evidence of “the initial cell of the ecclesiastical structures and the focus of evangelization...The essential element for the existence of Christian base communities are their leaders or directors. These can be priests, deacons, men or women religious, or laymen” (Medellin Document in Boff, 1997:15). In his book *Lessons in Liberation* (1981), Kirby explains how the Latin American Bishops viewed each community as “living cell” within an all-encompassing network of communities, and, as such, a dynamic ecclesial reality that reflected within itself something of the universal Church: “They are a new type of basic cell structure of the church, the first time in centuries that any significant sector of the church has developed new grass-roots structures for living out the faith” (Kirby, 1981:23). The emergence of the model of Base Christian Community and the impetus it brought to the Church across Latin America was recognised and sanctioned in the Puebla documents as the source of great hope: “We are happy to single out the multiplication of small communities as an important ecclesial event that is peculiarly ours, and as the hope of the Church” (Puebla, 1978:no.629). Sobrino suggests that the Puebla conference reaffirmed what was fundamental in Medellin and was illustrative of a recurring emphasis on the need for reform and renewal in the Church in the 1970s across Latin America: “It is no longer said with the surprising accents of something new, but rather with the calmness of something that continues to remain true and with a sense of urgency for it to start to become true where it is not yet a fact” (Sobrino, 1979:302). The Church was being liberated from ‘within’ as it “not only lent its voice to the poor but sought out their voice and let it sound out within the churches” (Sobrino, 1979:290-291).

This chapter is divided into 4 distinct parts in accordance with the understanding of thematic analysis in qualitative research outlined in Section 2.4.4, pp.30-32. Figure 3.1 (p.80) illustrates the underlying symmetry that exists between these parts and captures how the vision of Church envisaged in Liberation Theology has developed in correspondence with the momentum that is being generated among grassroots communities across Latin America. The research gives primacy to selected theologians of liberation who provide a probing insight into the specific dynamics of a Base Christian Community and who construct a theological framework to add greater credence to each defining feature of these communities. (See Section 1.4, p.10 for further clarity on the scope of the research). This strand of the inquiry draws extensively on the writings of Gustavo Gutiérrez, Leonardo Boff, Jon Sobrino and Juan Luis Segundo. The researcher also selects from the writings of

a plethora of other theologians of liberation where necessary to further consolidate the distinctive ecclesiological vision that animates these communities. These include; Alvaro Barreiro, Rebecca Chopp, José Comblin, Alvaro Quiroz Magaña, Cora Ferro, Ronaldo Muñoz, Carlos Mesters, Faustino Teixeira, Ignacio Ellacuría, Sharon Welch, Michael O’ Sullivan, Peadar Kirby, Denis Carroll, Arthur McGovern, Ana María Tepedino, Margarida Ribeiro Brandão, Maria Pilar Aquino and Letty Russell.

Theme 1, ‘Towards a New Ecclesiology – Promoting a New Era of Renewal’ (Section 3.2, pp.81-94), examines the views of the selected theologians of liberation on the limitations of the existing ecclesial structures and their assessment of the path the Church must take if it is to inject a new impetus into its mission in the world today. The overriding interest in this section is to underline the importance these theologians attribute to the momentum that is being generated at the ‘base’ of the Church and the potential of the people to re-define how the Church positions itself in the world so that it begins to embody the liberating power of the message it seeks to proclaim. Theme 2, ‘The Theological Backdrop to this New Paradigm of Church’ (Section 3.3, pp.94-101), explores the theological basis on which these communities are founded and critiques the achievement of the selected theologians of liberation in establishing a synergy between the liberative exploits of the people and the unfolding of salvation in history. Theme 3, ‘The Distinguishing Features of the Base Christian Community’ (Section 3.4, pp.101-134), highlights the defining characteristics of the Base Christian Community and illustrates how Liberation Theology provides a theological rationale to underscore each of these features. This section identifies 4 core components that are central to the identity of each community: the alliance between the grassroots community and the wider network of the Church; the centrality of the Gospel in the life of the community; the prophetic dimension to the activities of a Base Christian Community; and, arising out of the 3 previous components, the uplifting sense of God’s grace that is palpable in the worship of the people and in their solidarity for those who are suffering in their midst. Theme 4, ‘Looking to the Future – the Need for a Fresh Impetus’ (Section 3.5, pp.135-146), explores the views of those opposed to the theology of liberation and examines the challenges that these theologians must address if the model of Church that they promote is to breathe new life into the Church’s mission in the world.

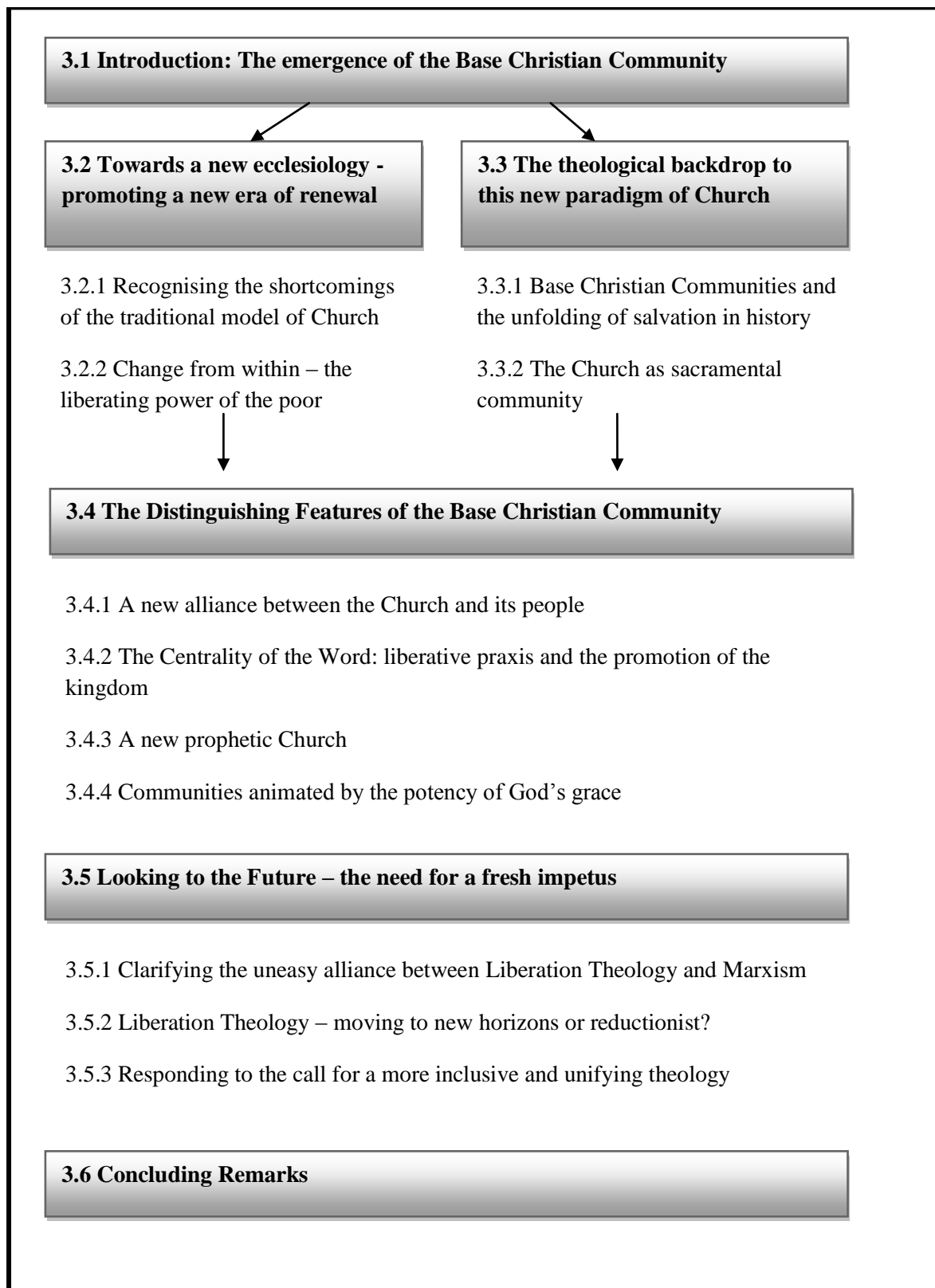


Figure 3.1 Chapter 3 structure

3.2 Towards a New Ecclesiology - Promoting Renewal in the Church

Liberation ecclesiology testifies to the potential of the people on the fringes of existing societal and ecclesial structures to exert a transforming influence in the world. Sobrino insists that the Church can only become a force for change in the world if it reflects this change within its own structures: “Thus understood, the mission of the Church has the power to draw many Christians and to break down the barriers that have separated bishops, priests, and laity” (Sobrino, 1984:207). Gutiérrez argues that just as the Church must offer “a radical critique of the present order...the Church must also criticise itself as an integral part of this order” (Gutiérrez, 1988:240). Gutiérrez challenges those in leadership in the Church to recognise in the spirit and the dynamism of the people at the grassroots “a new ecclesial consciousness and a redefinition of the task of the church” (Gutiérrez, 1988:227). Gutiérrez recognises that the Church must embark on a new path and take cognisance of the voice of those once silenced so that it can begin to draw closer to the ongoing revelation of its source in history:

Courage must lead us not to half way reforms that badly gloss over our fears and trepidations, but to a transformation of what we know today.... times demand of us a creative spark that will allow us to think up and create new ecclesial structures and new ways for the Christian Community to be present in the world. (Gutiérrez, 1983:34)

Section 3.2.1 (pp.81-86) examines the critique proposed by theologians of liberation of the weaknesses in the traditional paradigm of Church and their assessment of the need for a radical overhaul of the current structures. Section 3.2.2 (pp.86-94) explores how Liberation Theology places a spotlight on the potential of the people at the ‘base’ of the existing hierarchical model of Church to orientate the Church in a new direction and to give renewed impetus to its mission in the world. The aim of Section 3.2 is to establish how the transformative activity of people sidelined on the margins of ecclesial and societal structures is integral to the identity of the Church and central to the process of discovering a more authentic way of giving witness to the Gospel in the world today.

3.2.1 Recognising the Shortcomings of the Traditional Model of Church

Boff argues that under the constraints of the hierarchical model of Church, the people are sidelined to the fringes of Church life and decisions of importance are the exclusive remit of those in positions of authority. Within this dynamic, maintaining and protecting the

prevailing ecclesial order takes precedence over any attempt to bring about reform and renewal of these structures. Boff is in no doubt that the schematic and rigid form of the current structures prohibits real dialogue and consultation with the people in delineating a new way forward for the Church:

In terms of decision, the participation of the faithful is totally mutilated. Decision is restricted to the pope-bishop-pastor axis. A community in which the routes of participation are cut off in all directions cannot pretend to the name of community. (Boff, 1997:30)

The power in this organisation is contained within the hierarchical axis and those outside this domain are effectively sidelined to the periphery of the Church and are encouraged to acquiesce to the pronouncements of those in authority. In her book *Human Liberation in a Feminist Perspective- A Theology* (1974), Letty Russell argues that women are increasingly alienated within an ecclesial dynamic that restricts their involvement to peripheral matters and ultimately denies them the opportunity to participate actively in the governance of the Church. Russell argues that there is a resolute determination among women in Latin America to discover a more inclusive and more participatory way of being Church, striking out a new path that enables women “to find a dynamic sisterhood among themselves and with all women that might help to renew the life of the church for its mission of liberation and reconciliation” (Russell, 1974:172-173). Russell suggests that women see ordination as a perpetuation of a male caste system which must be transformed in order for women to receive equal recognition within the Church:

There are a growing number of women who have simply decided to drop out of the organized church structures altogether. They tend to look for alternative forms of community that allow sisterhood to flower without the restraints of male-dominated bureaucracies. (Russell, 1974:177)

Boff underlines that the prevailing ecclesial model is fashioned on “the ideology of the dominant class, calculated to safeguard the rights and prerogatives of that class” (Boff, 1997:26). In his book *Church Charism and Power-Liberation Theology and the Institutional Church* (1985), Boff illustrates how the origins of the prevailing power structure in the Church today date back to centuries old patterns, particularly the experience with Roman power and the feudal structure. Boff maintains that “The Church assumed customs, titles, expressions, and symbols from them. Hierarchy, as a term and as a concept, is a result of this process” (Boff, 1985:40). Boff proceeds to list some of the key

elements of the Roman and feudal style of authority that have become a natural part of the Church structure over the centuries. Under this system, the hierarchy has distinct “orders” or tiers of authority that increase in importance and power as you move upwards. A defining feature of this system is that the one in power is effectively such for life and his will is law. This hierarchy is ordained from above, from the will of God, and this style of authority cannot come under any scrutiny from people outside their confines:

The higher someone is in this hierarchy the closer one is to God and so has a greater share in God’s divine power. To obey one’s superior is to obey God...A questioning from below would be equal to a revolution in the universe. Thus, any thought of transformation is the same as an attack on God who is author of both the order and structure of sacred power. (Boff, 1985:41)

Within this framework, the Church leaders today have inherited their power directly from Christ, transmitted initially to the Apostles and then to their successors over the centuries, namely the Bishops and Pope. Boff argues that what results is a polarity between those in authority and those in obedience as “the actual community is divided between rulers and governed, between celebrants and onlookers, between producers and consumers of sacraments” (Boff, 1997:24). Invariably, the Church limits its sphere of influence to within its own boundaries, somewhat detached from and independent of society: “The Church is then the agent of the religious element in society. Business people and employers run the economic system. The Church is above the world, far from the conflicts of that world, beyond history” (Boff, 1989:12). McGovern reiterates this view insisting that the prevailing ecclesial model alienates those on the lower echelons from active participation in the life of the Church:

The traditional institutional church acts from the top down. It views itself as a juridical society in which God the Father empowers Jesus to found a church headed by a pope and bishops who transmit teachings and the sacraments through priests to the faithful below. Its very size and structure preclude it from being a true community. (McGovern, 1989:214)

Boff is convinced that the traditional Church has placed itself “outside the world” (Boff, 1989:12) and that its clearly defined parameters do not extend beyond the confines of the religious sphere. Boff maintains that the Institutional Church needs to re-position itself in the heart of history if it is to rejuvenate its mission in the world: “It is strange to see... that the Church institution has developed into exactly that which Christ did not want it to be”

(Boff, 1985:60). Sobrino cautions that “the Church cannot and must not preach itself, any more than Jesus preached himself” (Sobrino, 1984:204). A Church that sees itself as absolute and dismissive of the need to adapt its message to the vagaries of history will effectively distance itself from the challenges that each new time and place present. What is required, he suggests, is a new ecclesial dynamic that more accurately reflects the humanity and the vision of the people:

In positive terms the church is obliged to Christianize what I have called the historical level. This means that it must humanize the structures in which human being live as well as the human beings who make those structures, who are changed in the process, and who are to some extent shaped by those structures in turn. (Sobrino, 1981:182)

Magaña suggests that the Church should not confine itself to some esoteric realm, aloof and removed from the world but must discover its true identity by embedding itself in the intricacies of history: “Now, it is precisely in this last sense that liberation ecclesiology cannot be a finished whole, a closed system. It is an ongoing task, challenged at every moment by the novelty of history” (Magaña, 1993:184). Segundo echoes this view maintaining that the Church has something to learn from the world as well as something to contribute: “In dialogue, mutual service means that both contribute truth” (Segundo, 1973:99). In his book *The Community Called Church* (1973), Segundo contrasts his understanding of the Church in relation to the world with the traditional understanding of Church where the Church is seen as a supernatural society, complete and juridically perfect, that passes judgment on the world, whose value is received from something outside itself. The Church, he argues, must respond to the vicissitudes of history and reflect the yearnings of the people it purports to serve:

A church which dialogues and works with the rest of mankind is a church that knows she is part of humanity; a church that knows she is the conscious portion of the deeper mystery that is being worked out in every human life... a church that knows she is, by definition, in the service of humanity. (Segundo, 1973:131)

Sobrino contends that the Church needs to discover new ways of assimilating the Christian story into history so that it responds more effectively to the needs of its people. Sobrino argues that the more immersed the Church becomes in its own rituals and regulations the more immune it becomes to the suffering of its people. Sobrino asserts that “as long as the Church’s mission is conceived in doctrinal terms the conflict in the world will not besmirch

the Church” (Sobrinho, 1984:208). Sobrinho insists that the Church must now immerse itself into the heart of history and resist the inclination to retreat from the challenges of our time. Sobrinho argues that a Church removed from the world safeguards its own power at the expense of protecting its own people: “As long as the Church’s centre consciously or unconsciously thinks of itself in terms of power... and acts on the basis of that thinking, the Church will not change much” (Sobrinho, 1984:98). In his book *The Future of Liberation Theology: An Argument and a Manifesto* (2006), Ivan Petrella reiterates this view suggesting that the time has come for the Church to re-align itself with ideals that underscore the tradition it has inherited so that these ideals find expression in the wider social arena where their relevance and potency can be made real. Petrella recognises that Christian ideals of love and justice must reverberate outwards and impact on the wider social environs where the true efficacy of these ideals can be measured:

Thinking in terms of institutions is the means to define our ideals, while thinking about ideals is the means to avoid becoming prey to the institutions we currently possess. Institutions embody our ideals, but our ideals are never fully exhausted by existing institutions. (Petrella, 2006:105)

Boff is careful to distinguish between the individual persons who wield sacred authority and the organisational pattern within which they must work, which he deems flawed and sclerotic. Boff believes that the power to dominate and rule that defines much of the authority of the institutional Church must give way to a new kind of power Jesus himself used and urged upon his disciples. “The power of love”, he insists, “is different in nature from the power of domination; it is fragile, vulnerable, conquering through its weakness and its capacity for giving and forgiveness. Jesus always demonstrated this exousia in his life” (Boff, 1985:59). For Boff, a Church that reclaims the values of the Gospel and embodies them within its own structures can “recreate a model for the institutional Church because the model of power has given all it has to give” (Boff, 1985:58). Segundo argues that the Church as an institution needs to give precedence to embodying the message it has inherited if it wishes to find a more authentic presence in history in the knowledge that “it is obvious that there will inevitably be a period of uncertainty between the time people leave their crutches and the time they feel truly capable of acting out of love. It is a time of growth” (Segundo, 1980:136). Essentially, the overriding emphasis in the theology of liberation is that Church discovers its true mission not in isolation from the world but in

correspondence with all that this world reveals. Segundo captures this dialectic between the Church and the world succinctly:

What does the world give to the Church today? The answer is now clear to us. It gives to the Church a sense of urgency and deep relevance that she never had before. The situation of the world and the message of the Church converge. (Segundo, 1980:102)

Boff is in no doubt that the Church needs to extricate itself from its allegiance to the ways of the past and have the courage to venture down previously unexplored avenues if it is to add new momentum to its mission in the world today: “The surest, safest route for today is not the pathway to the past- the road already travelled. The surest, safest route for us today is the still-emblazoned trail leading straight ahead and to the future” (Boff, 1989:32). For Gutiérrez, the momentum towards a more inclusive model of Church is irreversible: “We are moving toward forms of presence and structure the radical newness of which can barely be discerned on the basis of our present experience” (Gutiérrez, 1988:233). The Church is no longer understood as a static, fixed entity removed from the world but one that evolves in consultation with the story of its people. Gutiérrez insists that the immediate challenge facing the Church is not to cling rigidly to the ways of the past but to map out a new route that breathes life into its mission in the world:

The Church is experiencing the effects of living in a world that is undergoing profound and decisive changes. The Church itself must set out on uncharted roads, turn down new byways, without knowing what risks and obstacles will be encountered. (Gutiérrez, 1983:35)

3.2.2 Change from Within- the Liberating Power of the Poor

Liberation ecclesiology is founded on the belief that the Church needs to be propelled forward by the creativity and dynamism of its people. The incorrigible spirit of the poor inspires the theologians of liberation to fashion an ecclesiology that reflects and celebrates their resilience in the face of overwhelming destitution. Critically, these theologians do not simply associate poverty with a state of hunger and exploitation, a lack of decent housing, unemployment, displacement from land, struggle for rights. Poverty is viewed as a way of being in the world; a way of thinking, believing, supporting, celebrating, and praying in the face of the oppressive and unjust social realities that the most vulnerable in society have to contend with. The theologians of liberation recognise that the resolve of the people

to create more equitable social conditions for their families and their communities has a significance that transcends the immediacy of their historical situation. Gutiérrez insists that vision and humanity that animates the Base Christian Community cannot be fully understood from a distance but only through engaging directly with the poor and walking alongside them in their journey towards liberation.

Commitment to the poor means entering into their universe and living in it. It means regarding it no longer as a place of residence. It means not going into this world for a few hours in order to bear witness to the gospel, but rather emerging from it each morning to proclaim the good news to every human being. (Gutiérrez, 1986:10)

Boff explains how the people who were silenced by society for so long have now begun to assert themselves and lay the foundations for a new, more humane and just society that respects their rights and legitimises their aspirations. Essentially, Boff insists that “the people now have the floor” (Boff, 1989:17) and they will not deviate from their intent to engage with and transform all that oppresses them. Boff acclaims the stoic determination of the people to effect change and their capacity to bring the liberating potential of the Gospel to life in their midst: “Suddenly we see: with the margin as its starting place, the gospel reveals its native colors. Our gaze is purer now. We behold only the essential. Everything becomes convincingly clear, and we are moved by the impact” (Boff, 1989:42). Boff argues that in places where the poor are growing in their level of consciousness, organising their activities, and demanding a more participatory and less elitist society “a new path for the Church has opened up” (Boff, 1985:11). Boff maintains that the people are beginning to move beyond the instinct to passively accept the prevailing structures and re-orientate these structures in light of their struggle for justice and liberation:

Surely the poor have needs to be attended to. But they also have the ability to transform history. They have worth. They have the ability to evangelize. The Church wishes to join them in their struggles, their anguish, and their hopes, and thereby join them in building a more just a more free common life. (Boff 1989:23-24)

Muñoz recognises the renaissance of the Church among those once alienated and silenced in the Church and believes that this moment in history heralds a time when “the poor will be able to find in the Church their own true home as an oppressed, believing people, the expression of their own faith and hope, and the anticipated realisation of their own

yearning for liberty, community and participation” (Muñoz, 1981:154). Gutiérrez acclaims the momentum that is gathering at the grassroots among people who see themselves as subjects in their own history, resolute in their struggle for justice and freedom and determined to make their presence felt in the world:

These times, therefore, bear the imprint of a new presence of the poor, the marginalised and the oppressed. Those who were for so long ‘absent’ in our society and in the Church have made themselves – and are continuing to make themselves – present... we are talking of those who have had scant or no significance, and who therefore have not felt in a position to make plain their suffering, their aspirations and their hopes. But this is what has started to change. (Gutiérrez, 2009: 20)

Paulo Freire explores the dynamics of this momentum for change and his critique of the potential of a once subservient people to exert a transforming influence on their social world illustrates how change can happen within established systems resistant to that change. Freire’s book *Pedagogy Of The Oppressed* (1970) offers a unique and unrivalled insight into how people submerged in systems that inhibit participation can initiate change and become determining subjects in their own history, a process that challenges religious, social and political structures in equal measure. Freire contends that those subjected to oppressive societal forces become complicit in preserving the system of dominance by their silence and their inability to take decisive action:

However, the oppressed, who have adapted to the structure of domination in which they are immersed, and have become resigned to it, are inhibited from waging the struggle for freedom so long as they feel incapable of running the risks it requires (Freire, 1970:29)

Freire argues that any “structure of domination” will only be transformed when those who are “immersed” within this structure take the initiative and bring their own creative energies to bear on these structures. The oppressed need to realise that their social milieu is not a fixed, static entity fossilised in time and beyond their powers of influence, but a dynamic that evolves over time in accordance with the creativity and yearnings that they bring to it: “In order for the oppressed to be able to wage the struggle for liberation, they must perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform” (Freire, 1970:31). For Freire, this recognition that “the reality of oppression is not a closed world from which there is no exit” opens up boundless possibilities for humanity. Freire insists that the impetus for this

process must come from the oppressed; it is they who can release a whole new energy and power into history, a power that Freire believes can liberate both the oppressed and the oppressor:

This, then, is the great humanistic and historical task of the oppressed: to liberate themselves and their oppressors as well... Only power that springs from the weakness of the oppressed will be sufficiently strong to free both. (Freire, 1970:26)

Liberation ecclesiology advocates a process of reform wherein those at the ‘base’ of the existing ecclesial structures become active participants in the life of the Church. Sobrino reflects on the radical challenge posed by those once consigned to the periphery of the Church insisting that “in this new situation the Church is returning to life—a life seriously threatened with destruction and irrelevance and even with betraying its own reason for existence if it does not become a Church of the poor” (Sobrino, 1984:84). Sobrino argues that the Church needs to draw its sustenance from the people and define its mission in accordance with their efforts to promote an alternative to the impoverishment that defines their existence: “It means making new those who have been dehumanized as passive objects of oppression by restoring their dignity and hope and placing them in humane living conditions” (Sobrino, 1984:107). Boff suggests that the institutional Church has failed to recognise the legitimacy of the struggle of the people to break free from the stranglehold of poverty and has misconstrued their efforts to confront the oppressive forces that consign their communities to such destitution and hardship: “It refused to acknowledge that they were historical agents capable of making their voices heard. It refused to acknowledge the justice of their claims and struggles” (Boff, 1989:13). Magaña argues that the Church *of* the poor differs distinctly from the Church *for* the poor in that recognises their alienable worth and their capacity to transform the life of the Church:

This is meant not only in the sense that it makes an option for them, lives for them, and is persecuted for their sake... but mainly in the sense that it arises from them, from their believing response, and that thus they come to be the authentic and first subject of ecclesial life and structure. (Magaña, 1993:185)

Magaña underlines how Medellín reflects a decisive shift away from a centralised Church orchestrated by the Vatican towards more autonomous communities propelled forward by their own people and contends “that becoming the church of the poor and being committed

to their cause and liberation is experienced not as an alternative Church but as a calling of the entire Church” (Magaña, 1993:191). The Bishops at Medellin acclaimed the impact of these communities in providing a platform for the people to create a model of community that redresses the anomalies of a society wherein the privileges of the few are protected at the expense of the wellbeing of the majority:

It is necessary that small basic communities be developed in order to establish a balance with minority groups, which are the groups in power... The church-the people of God- will lend its support to the down-trodden of every social class so that they might come to know their rights and how to make use of them. (Medellin, 1968: no. 1.20)

Lernoux realises the quantum leap the Bishops of Medellin in giving credence to a paradigm of Church that gave precedence to the needs and to the creativity of the people: “Medellin was a fundamental commitment to work for the construction of a community Church instead of the vertical Church we inherited with its pyramid of power” (Lernoux, 1979:11). Carroll reiterates this view believing that the “ecclesial community is placed in the centre, not the hierarchy, with the gifts of the Holy Spirit bestowed on the people for the service of the community” (Carroll, 1987:63). Hennelly believes that The Episcopate in Medellin signifies a historic definitive moment in the Latin American Church recognising as it does the potential of this emerging ecclesial paradigm to embrace the burdens those most alienated in their midst and carve out a new way of being Church in the world among them:

It thus provided legitimation, inspiration, and pastoral plans for a continent wide preferential option for the poor, encouraging those who were already engaged in the struggle and exhorting the entire church, both rich and poor, to become involved. (Hennelly, 1990:89)

Puebla underlines how these communities provide “a concrete opportunity to share in the task of the Church and to work committedly for the transformation of the world” (Puebla, 1978:no.643). However, the Bishops at Puebla cautioned against aspects of liberation ecclesiology that they deemed subversive and at risk of creating division and conflict within and beyond the parameters of the Catholic Church. They underlined, for example, the danger of “organizational anarchy or narrow-minded, sectarian elitism or of becoming a parallel church... independent of the institutional Catholic Church” (Puebla, 1978:no.10). (This association between aspects of the theology of liberation and subversive elements within and beyond the Church is examined in more detail in Section 3.5.1, pp.136-139 and

Section 3.5.2, pp.139-140). There were many possible reasons for caution at that time. Firstly, the self-understanding of Base Christian Communities, according to theologian and author, George Wiegel, had changed in that, through the influence of Liberation Theology, many of them had “taken up the task of ‘re-creating society’” (Wiegel, 1999:283). The Bishops feared that the militant and revolutionary activity of the poor to overcome their impoverishment would ultimately set the “people’s Church” over against the “hierarchical Church” as a necessary offshoot of their pursuit of justice (Wiegel, 1999:283). Secondly, Pope John Paul II highlighted the ideological tension that surrounded who Jesus was and the meaning of truth, as they had surfaced through Liberation Theology. Segundo had already claimed “the only truth is the truth that is efficacious for liberation” and he saw this in political terms (Segundo in Allen, 2000:143). John Paul II, on the other hand, in his address at Puebla, explained that Jesus “does not accept the position of those who mixed the things of God with merely political attitudes. He unequivocally rejects recourse to violence. He opens his message of conversion to everybody” (Pope John Paul II, 1979:101). Thirdly, the highly charged political atmosphere in much of South America very likely influenced the bishops. In January 1979, just before the Puebla meeting, Archbishop Romero had excommunicated the El Salvadoran president because of failure to stop the killing of priests and laity. Steps had already been underway by Vatican officials to reassign Romero prior to his murder because it was felt “his constant criticism of the government and his ‘option for the poor’ was threatening to fatally divide the church in that country” (Allen, 2000:150).

Sobrino argues that the wretched fate endured by so many of the world’s poor necessitates a new resolve from the hierarchy to overcome their ideological differences with certain facets of Liberation Theology and embrace the burdens of those most alienated in the world: “I am appalled to see that, apparently, no one is taking responsibility for the inhuman state of our world... One hopes the Church will set that example... The poor of this world will be grateful” (Sobrino, 2008:xii). Sobrino realises that involves a decisive shift in the mindset of Church leaders so that discover within the dynamism of the people “a newness in substance and a historical break from other ways of being Church” (Sobrino, 1984:84). Boff argues that Church leaders will only recognise the true potential of the poor if they first “pass through a true Paschal experience. They must die to their present mindset and rise to letting themselves be, and speak for, people without a voice” (Boff, 1986:238). Boff insists that if the Church is to truly reflect the spirit of its source in

history, it must create a new historical form that allows it to “struggle at the side of the poor, to be enfolded in their longings, to commune with Christ present in the poor” (Boff, 1989:81). The challenge he poses to the leadership of the Church is to embark on a journey with the poor that “consists of walking at their side and sharing with them the burden of their oppressed existence” (Boff, 1989:184). In his book *Francis of Assisi*, Boff illustrates how St. Francis advocated a form of Church that evolves in response to the challenge posed in each new historical epoch and that actualises the spirit of the Gospel in its defence of the rights of those subjected to great persecution in the world:

His intuition about the truth of faith and of the Gospel allows him to understand that no form of the Church exhausts the entire mystery of the Church. Each historical form concretizes the strength of the Gospel, because of which it must be respected and loved. (Boff, 2006:104)

Gutiérrez was greatly influenced by the sixteenth century theologian Bartolome de Las Casas and recognises in his witness to the indigenous Indians in the Latin America a template for a new way of being Church in the world today. Gutiérrez realises that Las Casas could see in these people a humanity and courage that the explorers were oblivious to: “As Columbus himself had said, they were a *tabula rasa*, a clean slate. Consequently, their lot was to toil for the newcomers and ultimately to be assimilated by them” (Gutiérrez in Nickoloff, 1996:281). The more Las Casas observed the suffering and persecution inflicted on the native Indian population, the more he distanced himself from the European mindset that tolerated such destruction and devastation. In the conclusion to his monumental study of Bartolome de Las Casas’ theological evolution, *Las Casas* (1996), Gutiérrez reveals how Las Casas and his fellow evangelisers:

... gradually divested themselves of their spontaneous sense of superiority and sought to move to the viewpoint of the dispossessed. This effort enabled them to read history in a different way and to understand the meaning of the swift and violent events of those years from the other side of that history. (Gutiérrez in Nickoloff, 1996:281)

Gutiérrez’ respect for Las Casas is founded on his willingness to deviate from the norm, from what was sanctioned from authority. Las Casas began to interpret life from the standpoint of those most exposed to the tyranny and plundering of the adventurers. His source became the gospels and his inspiration came from the recipients of the Christian message. Like Las Casas, Gutiérrez recognises that the Church must have the plight of the

poor as its starting point and become susceptible to the presence of Christ in their brokenness and pain. The Christian story compels the Church to embrace the struggles of those most alienated and forgotten in the world so that their needs and aspirations are no longer ignored: “My point is that history has not been fashioned and interpreted in terms of the poor but in terms of the privileged people who have humiliated and exploited the poor” (Gutiérrez, 1981:108). Gutiérrez believes, as Las Casas did, that the Church cannot extricate itself from its responsibilities in the world but must become a prophetic voice for those who are subjected to great persecution in the world. Nickoloff captures the enduring legacy of Las Casas and the indelible imprint he has made on the liberation ecclesiology. Las Casas challenges the Church to become embedded in the story of its people as it “risks situating itself within the history of the struggle for human emancipation. Attempts to ensure the uniqueness of Christian identity at a safe distance from that history only guarantee its decay and eventual loss” (Nickoloff, 1993:521).

Gutiérrez insists that a new paradigm of Church is needed that gives primacy to the contribution of those once excluded from societal and ecclesial structures knowing that “a Christian community made up of the least members of society... the unimportant folk of history, and ... committed to them cannot help but dramatically change the Church” (Gutiérrez, 1991:105). The Church exists not merely to communicate a message but to give witness to it, and, as such, Gutiérrez is in no doubt that the refusal to build the Church around, and for, the poor constitutes “a contradiction of the very essence of the ecclesial community” and a rejection of God’s will “to place [the poor] at the centre of the history of the Church” (Gutiérrez, 1991:104). Sobrino insists that “the entire Church should migrate to the periphery and share the powerlessness of the poor” (Sobrino, 1984:98). In his view, this move to the margins allows the Church to find a more authentic presence in the world and to recover the significance of the Gospel in the process. Essentially, liberation ecclesiology is founded on the belief that the poor re-align the Church with the ongoing movement of its source through history. In his analysis of the ecclesiology of Gutiérrez, Nickoloff contends that while solidarity with the poor does not guarantee structural change within society or the church, “the presence of the poor does promote affective, intellectual, moral, socio-political and religious conversions without which structural change is unlikely and meaningless” (Nickoloff, 1993:530).

McGovern contends that liberation ecclesiology has articulated a new understanding of Church in Latin America that blazes a trail for the universal Church to follow. McGovern believes that just as the founders of the Church “launched a movement aimed at overcoming death and the wretchedness of history” so too “the same resurrection of spirit manifests itself today in the church of the poor in Latin America” (McGovern, 1989:218). Sobrino maintains that the stimulus for this new Church need not necessarily come from the hierarchy but from ordinary men and women in specific historical contexts who mobilise their energies to alleviate the suffering of their neighbour. Their witness heralds a new way forward for the Church and grounds its mission in the immediate and pressing challenges of today: “The structure of the Church is not salvific by its own inherent nature. And someone can rise up within the Church to remind it of this truth-someone in the hierarchy or among the faithful” (Sobrino, 1984:202). Gutiérrez recognises that the potential for renewal in the Church will only be realised when the energies of those once consigned to the margins of the Church becomes a force for transformation:

The oppressed themselves should be the agents of this pastoral activity. The margined and the dispossessed still do not have their own voice in the church of him who came to the world especially for them...Their presence in the church would work a profound transformation in its structures, its values, and its behaviour. (Gutiérrez, 1988:243)

3.3 The Theological Backdrop to this New Paradigm of Church

The selected theologians of liberation maintain that Base Christian Communities mobilise the people to draw on their reserves of goodness and compassion and thereby create the conditions for God to intervene in their history in a special way. Liberation ecclesiology acclaims the role these communities play in channelling the potency of God’s love in the world: “The ultimate possibility open to human beings is that they should live the very life of God or, in other words, do within history that which finds expression in the essential reality of God, namely, love in a way that re-creates, saves, and gives life” (Sobrino, 1984:46). The theologians of liberation recognise in this new ecclesial dynamic an opening for the Church to dedicate itself to the liberation of its people, and, in so doing, to re-align the Christian story with the unfolding of that story in history. Gutiérrez believes that the time has come for a new era of renewal in the Church so that it can begin to more accurately reflect God’s love in the world:

This renewal cannot be achieved in any deep sense except on the basis of an effective awareness of the world in which the church lives and a real commitment to it...the church must be the visible sign of the presence of the Lord within the aspiration for liberation and the struggle for a more human and just society. Only in this way will the message of love which the church bears be made credible and efficacious. (Gutiérrez, 1988:234)

Section 3.3.1 (pp.95-98) examines the love and solidarity that is evident in Base Christian Communities in the context of God's recurring involvement in the story of humanity. This section explores the soteriological framework that underpins liberation ecclesiology and establishes its importance in giving credence to the unique dynamism of these communities. Section 3.3.2 (pp.98-101) explores how the theologians of liberation understand the Base Christian Community as a sacramental community that has the potential to channel the liberating power of God's love in tangible ways in their surroundings. The aim of Section 3.3 is to capture how theologians of liberation establishes the theological premise on which the model of Base Christian Community is founded by creating a synergy between the movement of these communities towards their liberation and God's ongoing participation in their history.

3.3.1 Base Christian Communities and the Unfolding of Salvation in History

Gutiérrez' ecclesiology is anchored on his unyielding belief in the importance of the Church embodying and giving witness to the love it signifies borne from his questioning of the relationship between "salvation and the historical process of liberation" (Gutiérrez, 1973:45). Gutiérrez places the activities of these communities in the context of the universal movement of history towards its resolution at the end of time: "We are a messianic people on pilgrimage through history and we are, of course, exposed to the vicissitudes of that process in its varied forms; nonetheless it is in and with the people that we go our way" (Gutiérrez, 2005:135). Gutiérrez acclaims the vitality and energy of these communities and honours the liberating impact they have had on the people at the 'base' of society as salvific. Their faith "reveals to us the deep meaning of the history which we fashion with our own hands" (Gutiérrez, 1973:237). For Gutiérrez, the salvific process "gives human history its profound unity" (Gutiérrez, 1973:177). Gutiérrez emphasises the universal salvific will of God and sees the process of salvation as something that is synonymous with the ongoing story of humanity. Gutiérrez establishes a distinctive

soteriological framework against which the activities of Base Christian Communities can be interpreted:

Salvation... is not something other-worldly, in regard to which the present life is merely a test. Salvation – the communion of men with God and the communion of men among themselves- is something which embraces all human reality, transforms it, and leads it to its fullness in Christ. (Gutiérrez, 1973:151)

Gutiérrez' soteriological vision effectively breaks down the artificial dichotomy between the Church and the world and ensures that the frontiers between the two are fluid in both directions. Salvation history is very much embedded in the heart of history given that "the liberating action of Christ is at the heart of the historical current of humanity; the struggle for a just society is in its own right very much a part of salvation history" (Gutiérrez, 1973:168). Gutiérrez sees in the dispossessed, in the poor, in the forgotten ones of history, the pathway through which God chooses to enter history: "God's presence is often hidden; God is present in what is insignificant and anonymous" (Gutiérrez, 1991:80). Gutiérrez is convinced that when the faith community comes together to effect social change, to protest, to lend support to each other, to pray and to draw sustenance from scripture and the Eucharist, they are contributing to the birth of a new movement in civilisation:

To the extent that the church creates room for freedom and participation, respect and dialogue, committed love and shared forgiveness, the defence and care of life, it gives birth to a new people.... causes the new creation to come into being. (Gutiérrez, 1991:105)

Boff believes that liberation ecclesiology bridges the divide between the world of theological inquiry and the everyday, discovering in the immediacy of the present evidence of God's recurring saving activity: "What saves us are not truths formulated in neat sentences but rather God himself who is given as salvation" (Boff, 1985:46). It is clear that Boff sees the story of salvation as something that is unfolding in history, and, as such, is made known to humanity through the everyday realities of this world: "It is important to understand that fundamentally salvation is universal and impregnates all history" (Boff, 1985:6). It is as though the people have an innate sense of God's willingness to be part of their history and that the promise of salvation is made available to them in the vicissitudes of their time and place: "The salvation that Jesus has gained and offered to us all is

certainly not limited to the “end time.” It overflows that time, surging back to the present” (Boff, 1989:170-171).

The story of salvation has begun in history, gathers its momentum through history but its completion lies beyond history. Liberation soteriology hinges on this essential dialectic between God’s presence in unfolding story of humanity with God’s existence beyond history. Gutiérrez reflections in *On Job* are particularly relevant in this regard. The theme of God’s gratuitous love is intimately tied to God’s saving love in the midst of pain and anguish. From his encounter with God, the suffering Job gained a graced insight that “the entire work of creation bears the trademark of gratuitousness” and that “God is entirely independent of space and time. God acts only in accordance with the utterly free divine will: God does what God pleases to do. No love at all can be locked in” (Gutiérrez, 1987:89). Russell suggests that the Liberation ecclesiology oscillates between the temporal and the infinite and recognises the salvific activity of God within and beyond history. Within this framework, she suggests, the emphasis shifts from creating and preserving ecclesial structures to unearthing the capacity of people to mediate God’s presence in the immediacy of their time and place: “Because open ecclesiology is *theocentric* and not *ecclesiocentric* it is concerned with all people. Its focus is on being together with other women and men as a manifestation of the humanity of God” (Russell, 1974:160). Segundo believes that the Church must anchor its mission firmly in the context of God’s ongoing involvement in the story of humanity. The danger, he cautions, is that the Church elevates itself above history and relinquishes its ties with its source as it is revealed in history. The Church is part of humanity, not some entity apart from it:

This entity which is a specific and particular reality within mankind must have been created for humanity, that is, in line with a divine plan as vast as humanity itself... Humanity was not created to enter a particular reality which it overflows at every turn. (Segundo, 1973:6)

Ellacuría argues that Liberation Theology gives primacy to the role the Church can play in contributing to the rolling out of salvation in history. Its starting point, he suggests, is “the saving work of Jesus, but it must likewise be a soteriology that actualizes in history this saving work and does so as the continuation and following of Jesus and his work” (Ellacuría, 1993:257-258). Sobrino too maintains that salvation is inextricably entwined in the realities of each new historical epoch challenging the Church to ground its activity in

responding to the immediate and pressing needs of its people: “Witness on behalf of the fullness of historical life must take on history as it is; such witness cannot be realized from outside history” (Sobrino, 1981:184). O’ Sullivan recognises how Liberation Theology, and Gutiérrez in particular, has set in motion a new soteriological understanding that emanates from the poor upwards and views salvation as a “set of possibilities in history, a history in which the struggle for life and liberation of millions is bound up with the responses of others also, and in which God’s saving grace of love is available to all” (O’ Sullivan, 1986:94). Pico acclaims the practice of “revolutionary love” that animates the life of each Base Christian Community believing that in their resolve to create a model of community that recognises the inalienable rights of all their people they are simultaneously drawing God deeper into their midst:

The God of Jesus, hidden in history, cannot be discovered by anyone who does not engage in the practice of justice, a practice looking forward to a new society and a new human being... That is to say, it makes possible our liberating encounter with God. (Pico, 1981:72-73)

3.3.2 The Church as Sacramental Community

Gutiérrez sees the church as “a sacramental community” (Gutiérrez, 1988:233), a visible expression of the presence of God within the liberating process made possible by the solidarity it forges with its people. As a sacramental community, the Church needs to be a concrete, clear and understandable sign of the liberation it professes as “it has all the more obligation to manifest in its visible structures the messages it bears” (Gutiérrez, 1973:261). Gutiérrez calls for “an ‘uncentering’ of the Church, for the Church must cease considering itself as the exclusive place of salvation and orient itself towards a new and radical service of people” (Gutiérrez, 1973:256). Russell captures this succinctly: “The church has no walls, nor does it draw a circle around itself that separates it from the world” (Russell, 1974:158). Segundo contends that the Church does not have a monopoly on the means of salvation for which all are destined. Rather, he suggests, it is to do the works of love in the world and to make manifest to the rest of humanity with whom it makes its way the mystery of God’s plan of salvation for all. The Church is essentially a sign, “placed here precisely and exclusively to pass on to men a certain signification, i.e., a message, something that is to grasped, comprehended, and incorporated to a greater or lesser degree into the fashioning of history and the world” (Segundo, 1973:81).

Codina argues that the sacramentality of the Church must always be viewed in the context of an unequivocal commitment to alleviating the suffering of those who are most impoverished in the world: “This sacramentality must always be a response to the cry of the poor and must be oriented to their integral liberation” (Codina, 1993:222). Sobrino insists that the Church can no longer afford to stand on the sidelines of history and extricate itself from the suffering of its people: “This concrete option for the poor means that the church’s witness on behalf of life can find correct historical embodiment, that it need not degenerate into abstract, idealistic witness” (Sobrino, 1981:164). Sobrino anticipates a time when human rights can be a reality within the Church community itself among those who give witness to the salvific activity of God through their solidarity with the poor: “Then the struggle for human rights and the defense of the life of the poor will be transformed into a here-and-now, efficacious, sacrament of salvation” (Sobrino, 1985:114). Aquino writes that “salvation is understood by Latina Feminist theology as liberation from every oppression” and that “the historical process of liberation from poverty, social injustice, and exclusion becomes the most effective and credible manifestation of God’s salvation” (Aquino, 2002:151). Implicit in Aquino’s comments is her recognition that all theologians of liberation, and not solely the Latina Feminist theologians, need to broaden the scope of social analysis beyond purely economic considerations and respond to the myriad of ways in which people can experience social exclusion in society. The inference is clear; if the theology of liberation only addresses the needs of the economically oppressed, its capacity to be the source of hope and unity among the many diverse marginalised groups in society may not be realised. The accusations levelled against the theology of liberation in this regard are explored in more detail in Section 3.5.3 (pp.144-146).

Boff’s ecclesiology evolves out of his conviction that the existence of the Church is not for itself but a sign of salvation for others, not only for those within the institutional structure, but for all people. Boff argues salvation is not the exclusive privilege bestowed on those within the Church but something that embraces all of humanity: “It is important to understand that fundamentally salvation is universal and impregnates all history” (Boff, 1985:6). Boff insists that God’s ongoing participation in history is disclosed to all of humanity and the Catholic Church, by inference, does not encapsulate the entirety of God’s all embracing salvific activity. Boff believes the institutional Church needs to be converted to Gospel poverty, but questions the possibility of this, as historically the power

of the Church “became a powerful temptation for domination and substitution for God and Jesus Christ” (Boff, 1985:49). Boff maintains that the Church begins to retrieve its true purpose in the world when it becomes “more evangelical, more at service, and more of a sign of that salvation that penetrates the human condition” (Boff, 1985:11). McGovern examines the repercussions of this soteriological understanding on how the Church defines its mission in the world:

The church needs to rethink its mission. Its purpose is not simply to “save” in the sense of guaranteeing heaven; the work of salvation occurs in history. Humans have a single fulfillment, which involves an integration of the spiritual and the temporal, of this world and the next. (McGovern, 1989:197)

Segundo contends that the Church is necessary for salvation, but not in the sense that one must be a member of the visible Christian community to achieve one’s salvation. The Church, Segundo believes, should not allow itself to focus on the size of its membership or rate of its growth, but should concern itself with translating the liberating power of the Gospel into history: “... the Church only aids the salvation of those who belong to her when their membership corresponds with the function that the Church is called upon to exercise with regard to the rest of the human race” (Segundo, 1973:82). The Church may have universality as a goal, he suggests, but it should concentrate its efforts on the minority ready and able to transform society so that it can move closer to “the undreamed of possibility of love” (Segundo, 1973:83). In his view, Christianity was never meant to be a “religion for the masses” but for a creative minority within society. (Segundo, 1976:209) Hennelly believes this theory has important implications for the Church in its present stage of transition. With remnants of Christendom disappearing, along with the social structures that furthered mass Catholicism, Hennelly argues that “a process of profound, personal choice and conversion provides the only alternative to adherence to the Church” (Hennelly, 1977:132-133). Widening the ambit of salvation beyond the domain of the Catholic Church, no matter how well intentioned, was sure to create division and conflict between theologians of liberation and those charged with protecting the institutional credibility of the Church. Given the importance of strengthening the alliance between these grassroots communities and the universal Church, could theologians of liberation do more to promote greater dialogue and collaboration with the magisterium and endeavour to accentuate the common ground that exists between the theology of liberation and Church

teaching? This thesis promotes a new alliance between the hierarchy and the people, believing that the institutional Church and grassroots communities co-exist and need each other to survive. Reconciling opposing views is a necessary precondition if this objective is to be achieved.

Sobrino is convinced that this time in history necessitates a radical new departure for humanity and that Base Christian Communities provide the template for a new salvific enterprise: “In a world sinfully shaped by the dynamic of capital and wealth, we need to develop an opposing dynamic that can salvifically overcome it” (Sobrino, 2008:14). The irony for Sobrino is that lasting richness is found in the world of the poor. Sobrino argues that the poor build their lives around values that have greater meaning and substance, values that strengthen them in the face of adversity and energise their efforts to create a social order that reflects their worth: “To put it plainly, the poor have values and produce positive realities and new social forms that, even if not given massive expression, do offer orientations and elements for a new society” (Sobrino, 2008:63). Oscar Romero’s tenure as Archbishop of El Salvador was defined by his conviction that “God and human beings make history. God saves humanity in the history of one’s own people” (Romero in Brockman, 1998:173). The people became the source of Romero’s inspiration strengthening his resolve to denounce all that was unjust and to awakening him to the reality that the salvation that they aspire towards is already present among them: “The history of salvation will be El Salvador’s history when we Salvadorans seek in our history the presence of God the Savior” (Romero in Brockman, 1998:173). Romero pinpoints the necessary impulse that must propel the Church forward if it is to truly embody the presence of its source in history: “Let us not forget. We are a pilgrim church, exposed to misunderstanding, to persecution; but a church that walks peacefully because we carry within us the force of love” (Romero in Sobrino, 1990:32).

3.4 The Distinguishing Features of the Base Christian Community

Boff places great emphasis on exploring the dynamics of Base Christian Communities with a view to identifying the inherent qualities that have allowed these communities to impact on the mission of the Church within and beyond Latin America. For him, these communities may “still be in embryonic form but we can already see in them the shape of the Church that is to come” (Boff, 1997:33). This section identifies 4 distinctive features

that are integral to the identity of Base Christian Communities. These features are intrinsic components in an evolving ecclesial dynamism and do not necessarily exist in isolation from each other in practice. As Figure 3.2 (p.103) reveals, the overriding concern in this section is to illustrate how Liberation Theology provides a theological rationale to underscore each defining element in the identity of the Base Christian Community, and, in so doing, indicate how each strand of theology arises out of the unique dynamism of this model of Church.

Section 3.4.1 (pp.104-112) examines how each Base Christian Community operates within a wider network of communities that combine to signify new possibilities for the universal Church. This section illustrates how the theologians of liberation draw a parallel between the indivisible unity between these communities and the symmetry that exists between each element in the Trinity. The overriding emphasis here is to illustrate how each community manifests the recurring activity of the Spirit in their midst through the creative energies of the people and their efforts to bring their talents and gifts to bear on the life of the Church. Section 3.4.2 (pp.112-120) explores the centrality of the Gospel in the life of each Base Christian Community and assesses the innovative ways in which the people release the liberating power of the Word into their surroundings. The primary interest in this section is to critique the particular dynamics of liberative praxis and reflect on how the distinctive style of Christian witness promoted in these communities encourages the people to contribute to the advancement of the kingdom in their time and place. Section 3.4.3 (pp.120-128) examines how these communities help the Church to re-discover its prophetic identity in the world. This section captures how the theologians of liberation acclaim the efforts of the people to promote an alternative to the prevailing societal norms and interpret their achievements in light of the utopian ideal towards which humanity is moving. Section 3.4.4 (pp.128-134) assesses a recurring theme in Liberation Theology that members of Base Christian Communities provide a conduit for God's grace to intervene powerfully in their history in their distinctive style of worship and in their solidarity with those who are most alienated in their midst. This section examines how the theologians of liberation interpret grace as a life force that reverberates out from each community into the wider social arena. As Figure 3.2 (p.103) delineates, the primary aim throughout Section 3.4 is to capture the defining characteristics of a Base Christian Community and to shed light on the underlying theological basis to these features.

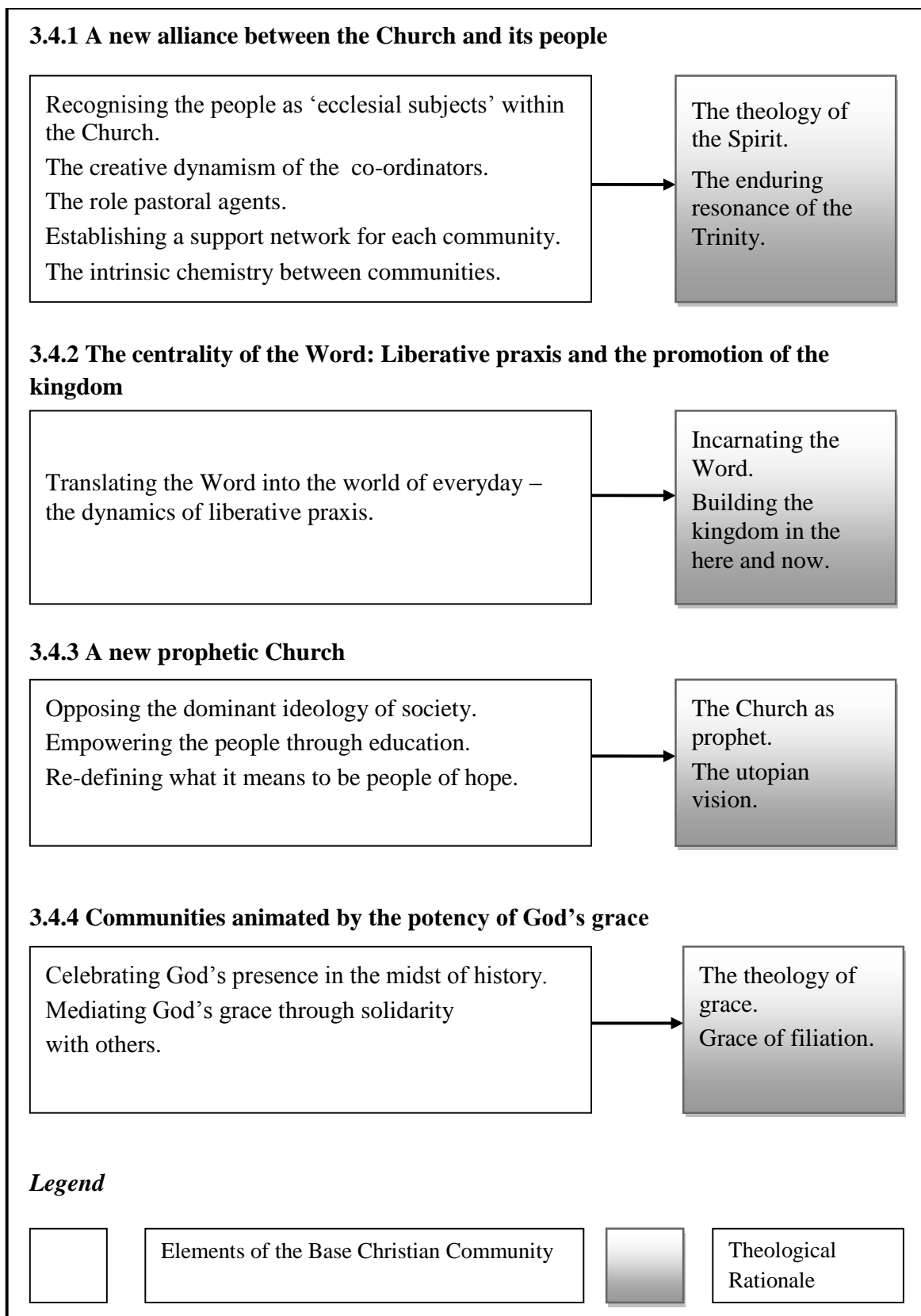


Figure 3.2 The distinguishing features of a Base Christian Community

3.4.1 A New Alliance Between the Church and its People

Liberation Theology acclaims the potential of Base Christian Communities to signify a new way forward for the universal Church that places the Church's mission in the world back into the hands of the people. In the Base Christian Community leaders emerge from among the people to play a central role in pooling the reserves of talent and energy at their disposal for the good of their community. Mich suggests that the Base Christian Communities encourage levels of participation that contrast distinctly with the often passive and anonymous experience of the Church. Mich recognises the decisive shift towards "responsibility, communication, mutual assistance, and friendship, and thus they create active and effective communities" (Mich, 1998:259). The people work alongside their leaders who in turn liaise with pastoral agents from the wider Church community to discover new ways of enriching the faith experience of their community. Central to this new ecclesial paradigm is the recognition of the inalienable worth of lay men and women as participating subjects in the life of the Church:

Now there is a new doer, a new maker of history, in the church, and this new active subject is doing theology or at least inspiring new theological reflection in the church... From here liberation theology draws its power and its strength (Ellis and Maduro, 1989:505)

Boff underlines how these communities are galvanised from within by the creative energy of the people as they explore more innovative ways of giving witness to their faith. In his view, this new synergy between the grassroots and the institutions re-defines the role of the laity within the Church and has ramifications that will extend beyond Latin America: "These communities have caused the laity to emerge as a genuine vehicle of ecclesiological values", and, in so doing, "are helping the whole church to 'reinvent itself', right in its very foundations" (Boff, 1997:32-33). Boff's *Ecclesiology and Church, Charism and Power* (1986) constructs a typology of such a Church:

Christian life in the base communities is characterised by the absence of alienating structures, by directing relationships, by reciprocity, by a deep communion, by mutual assistance, by communality of Gospel ideals, by equality among members. The specific characteristics of society are absent here: rigid rules; hierarchies; prescribed relationships in a framework of distinction of functions, qualities and titles. (Boff, 1986:4)

Within each Base Christian Community, the various responsibilities are broken down into ministries, allocated in accordance with the individual gifts and talents of members. Some with a background in education are encouraged to teach basic literacy skills and create a new consciousness among their people of the need to overcome the oppressive social conditions that they have to contend with. Others with a natural propensity to care may help in visiting and comforting the sick. Those endowed with musical talent are invited to play an active part in the planning of liturgical events and enrich their celebrations with songs and hymns that carry a particular resonance for their community. Boff maintains that the people have come to see themselves as 'ecclesial subjects', breaking the previous clerical monopoly of power and taking on the responsibility for carrying out the various services to meet the pressing challenges that they have to contend with:

In the base communities, almost entirely made up of lay people, one sees the true creation of an ecclesial reality, of communal witness, of organization and missionary responsibility. The lay people take the word in their own hands, create symbols and rites, and rebuild the Church with grassroot materials. (Boff, 1985:119)

Boff clarifies the distinctive trait in the style of leadership that animates these communities: "The roles of leadership and coordination are shared and so power becomes a function of the community rather than of one single person" (Boff, 1985:119). Leadership is not the exclusive privilege of those who in power but the shared responsibility of all many people within the community who harness their skills and talents for the wellbeing of the entire community. These communities have one Co-ordinator, or Animator who is responsible for organising the various activities of the community and for presiding over sacramental celebrations. This person is deemed by the community to have the qualities necessary to unite the entire community and to mobilise all members to play a defining role in the life and worship of their community. Each community ministry, in turn, has its own leader who works in consultation with the coordinator to introduce varied initiatives aimed at responding to the immediate and pressing needs of people within their community. Boff argues that these communities broaden the existing boundaries of Christian ministry and give rise to the creation of many new lay ministries that offer renewed impetus to the Church at the grassroots, and, by extension, the universal Church:

All of these functions are respected, encouraged, and coordinated in order that everything tend toward service of the whole community. The Church, then, more than an organization, becomes a living

organism that is recreated, nourished, and renewed from the base.
(Boff, 1985:128)

Russell recognises how, in many instances, these communities are animated by the dynamism and creativity of women who have begun to assert themselves through their faith community in ways previously unimagined. Russell reveals how Base Christian Communities have created the conditions for women to extend their sphere of influence beyond the home and leave their imprint on the wider social arena. Women are no longer blindly succumbing to the oppressive dictates of society and have become ardent proponents of the need for change as they “seek to discern God’s actions and to criticize those parts of the world (including themselves) which deny God’s plan and purpose of justice, freedom, and peace for humanity” (Russell, 1974:39). Russell underlines the vivifying impact these women have had on the Church across Latin America and how they have ignited a new defiance among the poor to liberate themselves from their oppression. Their resolute determination to effect change is filtering out beyond the immediacy of their community “helping to shape society and discovering new freedom, rather than being shaped by society and old cultural assumptions that close off the future” (Russell, 1974:39). Tepedino and Ribeiro Brandão suggest that women in Base Christian Communities are breaking free from a culture of servitude and are challenging the ideological assumptions and presuppositions that underpin the prevailing norms of society: “Instead, women are bent on a courageous examination of the preconceptions and stereotypes inculcated through social and cultural structures that place women in a position of inferiority” (Tepedino and Ribeiro Brandão, 1993:224). Women in these communities are beginning to envisage possibilities for themselves beyond the confining limits of their domestic tasks as they seek to channel their collective energy to effect change in their surroundings:

Women’s power of transformation still encounters obstacles when it comes to the manifestation of all its potential, but it is beginning to gain its own space... They learn that liberation of the marginalized is a daily victory, and a dynamic, creative process initiated by themselves.
(Tepedino and Ribeiro Brandão, 1993:221-222)

McGovern suggests that Base Christian Communities create a space for people previously silenced within society to work collectively to generate real change in the world, and, in so doing, “prod the church to open itself to new interpretations, or challenge it to live out the

spirit of the early Christian Church” (McGovern, 1989:223). Whilst these communities have provided women with the opportunity to bring their creative energy to bear on the life of the Church, Ferro argues that leadership is limited due to the constraints of the overarching patriarchal ecclesial structure “which is hierarchical and male... a model of the oppressive man-woman relationship” (Ferro, 1981:28). Ferro acclaims the vibrancy of women in Base Christian Communities as they participate assiduously in everything from catechesis to social outreach but suggests that this level of engagement must extend to the governance of the wider Church community. Without this participation in decision-making in the Church, Ferro cautions that these communities may “only confirm her in her attitude of passivity and resignation” (Ferro, 1981:28). Nickoloff reflects on how women “sometimes retire from active participation in CEBs in favour of explicitly political activity” when their leadership and personal development is prohibited (Nickoloff, 1993:529). Ferro anticipates a time when women at the ‘base’ of the traditional ecclesial order are empowered with the necessary skills and education to enable them to exert greater influence within and beyond the confines of Church:

Women should be encouraged to participate in grassroots communities engaging in Christian reflection. This is urgently needed. Women should also be trained to undertake the work of educating, systematizing, and leading. (Ferro, 1981:36)

Boff underlines the charismatic energy of these communities and suggests that the diversity of new ministries in the arenas of pastoral care, education and social justice “enables one to discover the true source of the ongoing birth and creation of the church: the Holy Spirit” (Boff, 1997:23). At the heart of these experiences of historical actions, he suggests, the liberative power of the Spirit is present. Ministry is not confined to the liturgical sphere but reverberates outwards into the social and political realities that impact on the lives of the people. Moreover, the emphasis shifts from understanding ministry as an exclusive privilege bestowed on a few to recognising the role each person can play in channelling the presence of the Spirit into their immediate surroundings: “They are a community of the faithful in which the Risen Christ is present” (Boff, 1985:126). All members of the community share in this spirit without mediation. The people embody the presence of the spirit and they all have a role to play in meeting the spiritual, social and political needs of their community. In so doing, Boff asserts “They are no longer just parishioners in a parish; they have their own ecclesiological value; they are recreating the

Church of God” (Boff, 1985:126). Ferro maintains that the natural vibrancy and exuberance of the people creates an opening for Spirit to intervene in their history: “Christian communities are originated by the Spirit on the basis of the people’s movement and its dynamism. By virtue of their specific Christian nature, they perceive, live, and proclaim the power of the Lord” (Ferro, 1981:32). Pico reiterates this view and suggests that God “will be present in history until its very end, accompanying the struggles of the poor with the impulse of the Spirit” (Pico, 1981:72). Magaña acclaims the solidarity and compassion that underscores the activities of these communities and the myriad of ways in which the people testify to the recurring presence of the Spirit in their midst. The people now provide a conduit for Spirit to intervene in their history in concrete and palpable ways:

We witness greater autonomy of the laity as they participate as Christians in concrete struggles for liberation... there are new ways of exercising the priestly and Episcopal ministry—more participatory ways, more democratic ways, ways that are more in the spirit of service and solidarity. (Magaña, 1993:190)

Boff believes that these communities testify to the enduring resonance of the Trinity in the world today: “Each person performs his or her own task, but in communion with everyone else. In this fashion the whole church is transformed into a sign of the Trinity” (Boff, 1996:86). Boff contends that just as the activity of the Spirit is never exhausted and finds new ground in each new generation, so too the Trinity by its nature is incomplete and constantly open to the vagaries of history. Each strand of the Trinity, like each community of faith, is testimony to a unifying creative life force that continues to make its presence felt in the world: “Life is the essence of God. And life is communion given and received. This kind of communion is love” (Boff, 1993:84). For Comblin, the Trinity offers renewed meaning and value to the activities of Base Christian Communities and places the evolution of each community in the context the ongoing movement of the Spirit in history: “This community never arises of itself... it does not close in upon itself; it opens up to become the seed of a new people founded on relationships of kinship rather than domination” (Comblin, 1993:152). Boff explains how these communities reflect the essential synergy that exists between the various parts of the dynamic of the Trinity as opposed to the dominant societal forces that elevate the wellbeing of the few at the expense of the many. In the same way as “each of the divine persons is for the others, with

the others, and in the others” so too “every living being is for another living being, and this relation guarantees its own life” (Boff, 1993:84). In his view, a consideration of the Trinitarian communion ought to prevent the concentration of power that has characterised the traditional model of Church and opens the way for a broad, egalitarian participation on the part of all:

It does not tolerate inequalities or impositions of uniformity; instead, it starts from the differences that, through *communio* among all, create unity in diversity, a dynamic unity that is always open to new expressions. The concept of *communio* lies at the root of the ecclesiology of the base church communities and of their understanding of community ministries and services. (Boff, 2002:82)

Boff sees the dynamic between the Institutional Church and the local Ecclesial Communities in a positive light. Across Latin America, there is evidence of a vast network of ecclesial communities working alongside a parochial and diocesan structure. Rather than accentuating the tension and the division between the new manifestation of the Church at the grassroots and the established Institutional Church, Boff is keen to emphasise what they have in common. Boff contends that they are two expressions of the one Church and each has a crucial role to play in supporting and encouraging the other. Boff pays tribute to the many instances where the Institutional Church allows the creative energy that animates these communities to percolate out into the wider parish and diocesan arena and testify to the recurring power of the Spirit as it is revealed in each new time and place:

There is no change in the ongoing coexistence of one aspect that is more static, institutional, and permanent with another that is more dynamic, charismatic, and vital. The will to impregnate the institutional, organizational aspect of the church with the spirit of community will never die in the church, and this is the wellspring of its vitality. (Boff, 1997:7)

Division between the grassroots and the institution gives way to dialogue and partnership in a new alliance where both become integral to the evangelisation process. Boff recognises the fundamental shift in emphasis in this emerging paradigm of Church as those in authority accept the need to share power with leaders that emerge from these communities. The Bishops organise workshops for their pastoral agents in everything from liturgical celebration to land rights and the pastoral agents in turn meet with the coordinators in their area so that they are able to implement these programmes in their own

communities. Far from being threatened by handing over responsibility and leadership to coordinators from these communities, Boff believes that the Institutional Church in many parts of Latin America encourages this process: “The various positions within the community are not predetermined by the attempt to preserve a preexisting structure but are responses to needs as they arise” (Boff, 1985: 119). Boff insists that the only real tension that exists is “between a Church that has opted for the people, for the poor and their liberation, and other groups in that same Church... who persist in keeping to the strictly sacramental and devotional character of faith” (Boff, 1985:126). Boff establishes the importance of this synergy between the grassroots Church and the wider institutional Church and cautions each Base Christian Community not to “delude itself into believing that it can exhaust the concept of community in its own being” (Boff, 1997:8).

Sobrino underlines how the mutual reciprocity that existed between Archbishop Oscar Romero and the poor of El Salvador is indicative of dialogue and collaboration that must exist between the institution and the grassroots if the Church is to re-claim its standing in the world. Sobrino reveals how the murder of Fr. Rutilio Grande within three weeks of Romero’s installation as archbishop proved to be a defining moment in Romero’s life and ministry. Up to that point, Romero believed that the Church at the grassroots seemed too political to him, too immersed in the immediacy of the current conflict and in danger of becoming over embroiled in what the authorities dismissed as subversive and revolutionary activity: “He interpreted the novelty of the council and Medellin from a very conservative posture, with fear of anything that might possibly immerse the church in the conflictive, ambiguous flesh of history” (Sobrino, 1990:8). Romero saw in Grande someone committed to a form of evangelisation that would only heighten the tension between the poor and the powerful and further provoke an already volatile situation. Grande was assassinated along with a child and an elder from Aguilares while driving to El Paisnal to celebrate an evening Mass. The experience of viewing Grande’s body and witnessing the despair of the people that evening in Aguilares impacted on Romero greatly. Sobrino observed that as Romero “stood gazing at the mortal remains of Rutilio Grande, the scales fell from his eyes” (Sobrino, 1990:10). For Sobrino the moment was decisive:

I believe that the murder of Rutilio Grande was the occasion of the conversion of Archbishop Romero... It was Rutilio’s death that gave

Archbishop Romero the strength for new activity... and the fundamental direction for his own life. (Sobrinó, 1990:9-10)

Sobrinó recognises how Romero's conversion parallels the journey those in authority in the Church must take if it is to embrace the possibilities that exist among the people at the grassroots. Sobrinó emphasises the enthusiasm and humility with which Romero chose to embrace the lives of the poor: "He fairly rushed to the poor, in order to receive from them, to learn from them, and to enable them to impart to him the good news" (Sobrinó, 1990:34). Romero did not remain an impartial observer to the suffering of the poor but participated with them in their struggles, drawing sustenance from them and encouraging them to find their voice: "Each one of you must be God's microphone, each one of you must be a messenger, a prophet" (Romero in Brockman, 1998:142). In so doing, Romero broadened the parameters of his ministry so that it derived its inspiration and impetus from his people. Sobrinó suggests that in Romero the traditional divide between those in leadership and the people seemed to dissipate seamlessly and the people became central to the process of evangelisation: "His people filled his heart. He let himself be loved, and this is the most radical way to span distances and burst boundaries, which always exist between those of high and low estate" (Sobrinó, 1990:35). Freire identifies the vital ingredient needed to forge a new partnership between those in authority and those at the base of the traditional pyramid of power in societal and ecclesial structures so that collectively they can effect change in the world: "Dialogue cannot exist, however, in the absence of a profound love for the world and for people. The naming of the world, which is an act of creation and re-creation, is not possible if it is not infused with love" (Freire, 1996:70).

Boff realises that this shift in social locus of the Church came as a result of a genuine conversion process within the Church in Latin America and the momentum that it brings will not be surrendered easily. Like Romero, Boff is convinced that "the future of the institutional Church lies in this small seed that is the new Church growing in the fields of the poor and powerless" (Boff, 1985:63). This new prophetic Church gives primacy to unearthing the evangelising potential of the people at the 'base' of the Church and urges them to translate the Gospel into the immediacy of their world in new and exciting ways: "Now the gospel would be taken over by the poor and used by them for the purpose for which it was written" (Boff, 1989:13). Regan urges those in authority to retreat from their allegiance to the ways of the past and embrace the initiative and insight of the people:

Never may we plan for others but always with them, for they have their own gifts and initiative which we must learn to respect and foster even where they themselves have never discovered their worth. The Church as community can only emerge through our conversion from patterns of domination. (Regan, 1976:847)

McGovern underlines the mutual dependency that exists between the institutional church and the base community. In his view, the evangelising potential of the Base Christian Communities can give added impetus to the Church's mission in the world just as being part of a wider ecclesial network offers renewed support and credence to the activities of each community. McGovern underscores the importance of creating a dynamic symmetry between the institutional church and the base communities given that both "cannot afford to become alienated from each other" (McGovern, 1989:222). Torres reiterates this view believing that in advocating the need for a new paradigm of Church that ascends from the base upwards "we are not speaking of a church that is parallel to the institutional Church, but rather one that responds to the most basic Gospel demands" (Torres, 1981:6). For Boff, this potential alliance between the grassroots and the institution signals a new way forward for the universal Church:

Now the road is open to a new incarnation of the gospel in a still-unreached continent, the continent of the poor. And a new kind of organization can spring up in the Church, an organization that is more popular, more shared, more closely connected with the cause of justice and a life worth living. (Boff, 1989:17)

3.4.2 The Centrality of the Word: Liberative Praxis and the Promotion of the Kingdom

In the Base Christian Community, the world of the Gospel and the everyday world of the people coalesce. Scripture reflection arises from the experiences of the people, and, in turn, provides the stimulus for the people to transform aspects of their experience that inhibits their growth and development as a community. Boff draws great encouragement from the manner in which the people set about organising their own Christian gatherings, coming together once or twice a week in small clusters comprising of 15 to 20 families to hear the Word and reflect on its significance in their lives. The Base Christian Community essentially provides a platform for the poor to share their problems and discern a decisive course of action in light of their reflection on the Gospel: "The Church abides in the people of God as they continue to come together, convoked by the word and discipleship of Jesus Christ. Something is new under the sun: a new church of Christ" (Boff, 1997:13). The

people begin to see the Bible as a familiar book that offers a unique perspective on their own situation and the Word filters out into all facets of life within the community. Regan reveals how the popular exegesis of the community goes beyond the literal interpretation and captures the living, spiritual meaning of the text. In effect, the interpretation the people ascribe to the Gospel is reflective of the myriad of ways in which the Gospel is already present in their midst:

The word of God, listened to, reflected on and prayed about, is foundation for any community which can call itself Christian. To be vitalizing today the word must be heard not only from the Bible but from life. That is, the Bible must be read with attention not only to the literal meaning of the words themselves... but also to what the Spirit is doing today in the community which is reading it. (Regan, 1976:846)

Boff emphasises how “the Gospel is always confronted with life” and that this relationship “takes shape through a slow and difficult process within the community” (Boff, 1985:127). If members of the community are suffering from illness, a team of carers will make sure the needs of these people and their families are met. If a member is imprisoned for fighting for land rights or other entitlements for the community, the family of that member will be supported by the community for the duration of his/her time away. Boff recognises how the faith of the people finds expression in all strands of life in the community: “Faith is not alienated from the world nor does it create a community apart from other people; it is the ferment of indefatigable hope and love, supporting the strength of the weak and the certainty of the search for justice and fraternity” (Boff, 1989:124). Boff insists that these communities are more than an instrument of social and political change, they are “a new and original way of living Christian faith” (Boff, 1985:9). For him, the source of the people’s inspiration emanates from the world of scripture: “The basis of these communities is the word of God that is heard and reread within the context of their real problems; they are held together by their faith, their communitarian projects, their helping one another, and their celebrations” (Boff, 1985:121). Clodovis Boff clarifies the distinctive hermeneutics that must underpin scriptural reflection if the liberative meaning of the passage is to become apparent. For him, the Gospel only becomes transformative when it is assimilated into the pressing historical realities that define each new generation:

A liberative hermeneutics reads the Bible as a book of life, not as a book of curious stories. Surely it seeks the *textual* meaning there, but does so for the sake of its *life* meaning. Here the important thing is not

so much to interpret the text of the scriptures as to interpret the book of life “according to the scriptures” (C. Boff, 1993:16)

Boff contends that the overriding spiritual emphasis that underscores the activities of a Base Christian Community reflects this essential dialogue between faith and life, between political activism and religious praxis: “The base ecclesial community does not become a political entity. It remains what it is: a place for the reflection and celebration of faith” (Boff, 1985:9). The Word is interpreted in correspondence with the world and the faith of the people and thereby becomes a liberating force even in the face of insurmountable social difficulties: “Their faith is not changed but rather, faced with the facts of life, it is strengthened, doubled, and shows itself for what it is, a leaven of liberation” (Boff, 1985:127). Barreiro reflects on how this ongoing dialogue between the everyday experiences of the people and their reflective response to the Gospel stirs an awakening within the people of their capacity to generate renewed hope and optimism into the life of their community: “The gospel is not something that comes from outside, culturally. It is a seed which sprouts from the ground of their suffering and oppressed lives and which breaks the hardness of that ground precisely because it is rooted therein” (Barreiro, 1982:30). Boff recognises the evangelising potential of the poor as they find innovative ways of bringing the Word to life in the immediacy of their struggles. The people are no longer passive recipients of the Christian story but are active participants in the process of retrieving the significance of this story to sustain them in their unwavering journey towards liberation. As such, Boff understands the importance of the poor to the Church not “simply as those in need; they are in need but they are also the group with a historical strength, a capacity for change, and a potential for evangelization” (Boff, 1985:9-10).

Gutiérrez argues that communities of the poor testify to the enduring resonance of the good news through the resilience and solidarity that is palpable among the people: “We cannot enter into the world of the poor, who live in an inhumane situation of exclusion, without becoming aware of the liberating and humanizing dimension of the good news” (Gutiérrez, 2009:323). Drawing inspiration from Las Casas, Gutiérrez argues that the people who show such humanity in the face of persecution and injustice “are not just the privileged addressees of the gospel message. They are also the bearers by the very fact of who they are” (Gutiérrez, 1981:120). Gutiérrez believes Las Casas to be the real explorer, the one who discovered evidence of the recurring presence of the Word in the people he

sought to evangelise: “He saw in the Indian, in this “other,” this one-different-from -the-Westerner, the poor one of the gospel, and ultimately Christ himself” (Gutiérrez in Nickoloff, 1996:282). Gutiérrez underlines the constant interplay that exists between reflection and action that governs the liberative praxis of these communities. For him, reflection on the Word results in a corresponding action that brings the Word to life in their midst: “To accept the Word is to turn ourselves to ‘the Other’ in others. It is with them that we live the Word” (Gutiérrez, 2007:33). Through praxis, the truths once proclaimed now become authenticated by the living embodiment of these truths: “In the deed our faith becomes truth, not only for others, but for ourselves as well. We become Christians by acting as Christians” (Gutiérrez, 1983:17). Gutiérrez maintains that praxis becomes liberative when “the poor evangelize by liberating themselves” so that now “the proclamation of the good news of the Father’s love, takes place in the very process of liberation where brotherly love finds expression” (Gutiérrez, 1981:120). McAfee Brown clarifies this understanding of praxis:

A ‘praxis situation’ is one in which theory and practice are not separable. Each continually influences, and is influenced by, the other; as the mutual interchange goes on, they are not only constantly transforming one another, but are transforming the overall situation as well. (McAfee Brown, 1990:65)

Carlos Mesters suggests that the centrality of the Word in Base Christian Communities is not anarchic, for it is a communal, shared reading rather than an atomised or individualistic study. In his view, liberative praxis evokes in the immediacy of the present a creative or transformative response that bridges the divide between the life experiences of people and the world of the Gospel. Mesters reveals how this synergy between the Gospel and experience forges an indelible connection between each Base Christian Community and the world of scripture: “The word of God is not just the Bible. The word of God is within reality and it can be discovered there with the help of the Bible” (Mesters, 1983:122). Mesters identifies three distinct elements in the interpretation of the Word that are required if the Gospel is to resonate in the lives of the people; the Bible, the community in which the Bible is read and the immediate reality in which the Word is actualised:

In the first situation the group involved comes together solely for the sake of discussing the Bible; the Bible is the only thing that unites them and they stick to it. In the second situation the people focus on the Bible, too. But they come together as a community. In the third

situation we have a community of people meeting around the Bible who inject concrete reality and their own situation into the discussion. The struggle as a people enters the picture. (Mesters, 1981:199)

Mesters illustrates how this reciprocal alliance between the Bible and the real-life situation of the people is what distinguishes the scriptural exegesis practiced in Base Christian Communities. Hence, in this approach to the Bible, the confluence of text, community and concrete reality educes a response that goes beyond the level of speculation and empowers the people to persevere in their pursuit of justice and liberation. The Word illuminates their world and challenges the poor to address the root cause of their oppression so that they can take the appropriate measures and transform what is unjust and intolerable in their society. Murray assesses the impact this emphasis on liberative praxis has had on marginalised peoples around the world and acclaims the heightened awareness that now exist among these poor of their capacity to effect change:

Liberating social praxis requires solidarity understood as transformative action with and for the poor, and individuals are invited to move beyond isolating individualism and join in solidarity in the building of a new society. (Murray, 1998:53)

Sobrinio suggests that in the Base Christian Community the Christian Story and the story of the poor converge in a way that allows the Good News to echo deeply in their history. The Gospel becomes a catalyst for change, compelling those who have suffered to intervene in history with a view to transforming all that is unjust and unacceptable: “It follows logically that only to the extent that we adopt the perspective of and show solidarity with the poor will we have the capacity to hear the Good News as it was preached in history” (Sobrinio, 1984:140). Sobrinio contends that the Word by its very nature necessitates a response so that God’s compassion for them could be more keenly felt and that true evangelisers “not only proclaim God’s love for human beings, they initiate it, they make it present” (Sobrinio, 1985:134). Sobrinio recognises how Oscar Romero’s embodiment of the Word became the most striking and potent feature of his ministry: “Archbishop Romero was a gospel. Archbishop Romero was a piece of good news from God to the poor of this world, and then from this starting point in the poor, to all men and women” (Sobrinio, 1990:58). Indeed, Sobrinio recalls how one of the dominant themes recurring in Romero’s pastoral letters and homilies is the importance of incarnation: of giving flesh to Christ’s word in history. Romero proclaimed the Word in the context of the pressing historical realities that

his people had to contend with: “We cannot segregate God’s word from the historical reality in which it is proclaimed... It becomes God’s word because it vivifies, enlightens, contrasts, repudiates, praises what is going on today in this society” (Romero in Brockman, 1998:11-12). Romero was convinced that commitment to the Word required a commitment to history, to addressing the challenges of the times in the light of the inspiration drawn from the Gospel:

Some want to keep a Gospel so disembodied that it doesn’t get involved at all in the world it must save. Christ is now in history. Christ is in the womb of the people. Christ is now bringing about the new heavens and the new earth. (Romero in Brockman, 1998:102)

Gutiérrez places the social and political activism that is integral to the life of the Base Christian Community in the context of the kingdom and the movement of civilisation towards its completion at the end of time. Gutiérrez underlines that through this emphasis on Christian praxis God’s salvific kingdom is instituted now. Every initiative aimed at transforming what is unjust and unacceptable forms part of the building of that kingdom given that “the struggle for justice is also the struggle for the kingdom of God” (Gutiérrez, 1973:168). Gutiérrez recognises that the advancement of God’s reign is conditional on the efforts of humanity to create the conditions for justice to triumph: “Without liberating historical events, there would be no growth of the Kingdom” (Gutiérrez, 1973:177). For him, God entrusts creation to humankind as a project to be built, developed and brought to its completion in history: “To hope in Christ is at the same time to believe in the adventure of history, which opens up an infinite field of possibilities for the love and action of the Christian” (Gutiérrez, 1988:223-224). Gutiérrez maintains that liberative praxis releases the potency of human goodness into history and contributes to the unfolding of God’s intentions for humanity: “It is not enough to say that love of God is inseparable from the love of one’s neighbour. It must be added that love for God is unavoidably expressed through love of one’s neighbour” (Gutiérrez, 1988:190). Sobrino is insistent that the all-pervading social inequalities that the poor are subjected to are a perennial reminder to these communities that as long as there is suffering in the world the kingdom has not yet arrived. The reign of God in the world, the kingdom of God, must be made real and palpable by Christians if God’s love is to become an effectual and powerful force in history. To wait for its arrival is insufficient: “If the challenge is met, the crisis surmounted, and the practice of love sustained, then the ultimate supremacy of love is

proved at the level of practice” (Sobrino, 1985:288-289). Sobrino establishes the connection between the liberative praxis that animates the life of the Base Christian Community and the building of God’s kingdom, believing that a fuller understanding of the meaning of the kingdom is realised in the process of bringing it to fruition in history:

Before doing something on behalf of the Reign of God, less is known about that Reign than after doing something for it. In terms of practice, the signs of today are made concrete and thereby grasped. New signs are discovered. The roads to be traversed are identified... Practice reveals what the Reign is. (Sobrino, 1993:64-65)

Gutiérrez underscores the importance of consolidating this alliance between the Church and the world by actualising the kingdom in the midst of the historical challenges that each Christian community has to contend with. Gutiérrez explains how each community has the potential to move history closer in the immediacy of their time and place toward the fulfillment that God aspires for humanity: “History will not achieve its total maturity as long as it has not achieved its eschatological end. Therefore every historical period always has new possibilities before it” (Gutiérrez, 1988:244). The kingdom is not a ‘fait accompli’; it is something that is evolving, growing and moving closer to its accomplishment in history. For Gutiérrez, the kingdom is “an event that is already present but has not yet attained to its full form. There is at work here a dynamic vision of history as set in motion by the gift of the kingdom” (Gutiérrez, 1991:102). The “eschatology” of the kingdom, this oscillation between ‘what is now’ and ‘what is yet to come’, compels these communities to see in the present a movement towards something that has not yet been fully realised. Gutiérrez concludes that the kingdom as we experience it now is at an ‘in between’ time, in the process of becoming:

The kingdom that is sought is already present among us, not fully, however, but in an inchoative form that makes us hungry for the full reality. The signs of the kingdom speak to us of the historical presence of the kingdom but at the same time they open us to a future. (Gutiérrez, 1991:104)

Barreiro is keen to emphasise that the transcendence of the kingdom does not undermine the significance of the concerted efforts of these communities to play a defining role in rolling out the kingdom in the midst of their struggle for justice: “The Kingdom of God is not a future world totally dissociated from the world in which the human beings of today, with their victories and defeats, live and struggle” (Barreiro, 1982:62). Boff captures how

liberation eschatology moves seamlessly from the past to the present and direct humanity towards what is to come in the future: “The world is understood as the place of God’s activity, of the building of his Kingdom here and now, open to the eschatology that has yet to be realized in its fullness” (Boff, 1985:6). Russell captures how this dialectic between ‘the already’ and the ‘not yet’ underpins much of the women’s liberation movement within and beyond Latin America:

By their new thoughts and actions women are saying that they are already on their way toward freedom. They know, however, that they have not yet arrived because no one is free until all are free. The horizon changes but does not disappear because a few people gain new privileges and responsibilities. (Russell, 1974:42-43)

Codina reconciles this relentless movement towards the realisation of the kingdom with the ongoing activity of God in the world in the belief that the future goal towards which civilisation will ultimately be determined by God: “It is God’s kingdom, and we must give thanks for its nearness in Christ, but it has not yet reached its fullness; we must go on building it, if only partially, because it always overflows and transcends our efforts” (Codina, 1993:224). Gutiérrez too establishes a continuity between the growth of the kingdom “*in liberation*” and the ultimate fulfillment of this activity “which is above all a gift” (Gutiérrez, 1973:177). Romero acclaims the collective resolve of the poor in peasant unions and justice groups on the periphery of the Church and their role in “working for God’s reign” and contends that “the church does not comprise all of God’s reign; God’s reign goes beyond the church’s boundaries” (Romero in Brockman, 1984:38). Barreiro argues that Base Christian Communities are places of communion, where the presence of the kingdom of justice, peace and love is manifested visibly and effectively through the solidarity and compassion of the people: “The Church, which they are, effectively manifests the presence of the Kingdom among human beings when the poor, dispossessed, and abandoned people of those communities are received in the Church as if it were their own home” (Barreiro, 1982:52). Their efforts to reach out and embrace the burdens of those who are weakest in their midst accelerates in the immediacy of their present experience the movement towards the accomplishment of what is yet to come, and, in so doing, give testimony to the transformative power of the Christian message:

By serving their poor brothers and sisters, the Christians in the CEBs are effectively proclaiming the good news of the liberation of the poor. Therefore, at the end of time there will be revealed in their

works the reality of the Kingdom, which is now hidden (perhaps even from their own eyes), but really present. (Barreiro, 1982:39)

3.4.3 A New Prophetic Church

Boff believes that the emergence of the Base Christian Community has provided the stimulus for action among oppressed peoples of Latin America aimed at overcoming the abject poverty that has been inflicted on them by the dominant classes. It is the poor “who must develop a consciousness of their oppressed situation, organize themselves, and take steps that will lead to a society that is less dependent and less subject to injustices” (Boff, 1985:7-8). Boff views the resurgence of the poor in Brazil as something founded on their contempt for the value that capitalist society attributes to them and their resolve to make a contribution in their social and political environs that far exceeds what the prevailing ideologies have conditioned them into believing. Boff maintains that their refusal to accept their fate is founded on a desire to liberate themselves from the socio-economic forces that oppress them: “A torn social fabric is being mended. A tiny, helpless flower is threatening the wild jungle of the prevailing antipopular, despotic order” (Boff, 1989:16). Within this system, the poor become a commodity that safeguard the monetary interests of the ruling elite and any efforts to oppose this domination are often quickly crushed by the military wing of the prevailing social order. The liberation the people seek reflects their desire to establish within their own environs a new alternative model of society that gives primacy to the wellbeing of the many over the privileged interests of the few:

A new type of society is taught within the community. One learns to overcome the unjust relationships that dominate the larger society. How? Through the direct participation of all the members of the group, the sharing of responsibilities, leadership, and decision-making, through the exercise of power as service. (Boff, 1985:129)

Segundo argues that the Church institution in the past has tended to align itself with the power structures that could promote its welfare and engaged in compromises when necessary to achieve these ends. Segundo does not simplistically accuse the Church of siding with dictators and ruling classes for the sake of power or financial support. His position “accuses the Church of being indifferent to the political program of persons and parties, of being concerned solely about maintaining the dominion of Christian civil institutions in the sphere of public interests” (Segundo, 1974:32). Boff is convinced that if

the Church is removed from the pain and struggle of its people and the unjust social regimes that perpetuate this suffering, it is, in essence, complicit in imprisoning its people in a net of poverty and injustice. Boff insists that instead of remaining silent and casting an indifferent eye on social events, the Church must be more resolute in its denunciation of the persecution perpetrated against the marginalised in society:

The deeper the Church has sunk its roots in the popular milieu, the more it has understood that it must speak of a liberation wrought by the people themselves...This implies the historical surmounting of the capitalist system. (Boff, 1985:15)

It follows that the Church no longer limits its sphere of influence to the religious dimension of society but has the courage to take a stand against all that inhibits the people from realising their true potential. Gutiérrez argues that to remain silent in the face of oppressive cultures is to endorse the “dominant ideology” that holds it together and to encourage a passive acceptance of this ideology. When the Church speaks out, he explains, it can initiate a counter movement to all that is oppressive in society and facilitate a growing understanding among the poor of their capacity to effect change in the world. It is then, he suggests, that the Church “can cause the old underpinnings of the established order to fall, and it can mobilize new energies” (Gutiérrez, 1988:240). Comblin underlines the need to facilitate a process that enables the poor to voice their intolerance of the oppressive societal norms that they have to contend with and begin to envisage possibilities for their communities beyond what the present elicits:

A word of this kind denounces the silence in which the peoples have been kept under the thumb of the oppressor. It denounces the structures of domination. It announces a new life, a different society. It calls together and unites the poor. It stimulates, it animates, it strengthens the communities, it enunciates projects, it points to horizons and goals. (Comblin, 1993:150)

Barreiro maintains that the Church must retrieve its prophetic identity and continue in history Jesus initiated through his ministry. This necessitates a clear and unambiguous rebuke of the oppressive forces that bind the poor to their impoverished conditions and a willingness to participate with them in their pursuit of justice. In his view, the Church must be a ‘conscientious objector’ of the present social order yet simultaneously embrace the needs of those who are marginalised and oppressed within this order: “The Church cannot confine itself to a merely verbal proclamation of the good news of the Kingdom to the

poor and to a denunciation of what is in flagrant contradiction to it” without first performing “deeds and acts of liberation” (Barreiro, 1982:52). Boff argues that as the hierarchy engage with the poor and encourage them to unite, organise and act in community solidarity, the Church discovers its own prophetic vision and sees its role in the world from a new and unique perspective:

Viewed from their centers, from their sky-scrapers and their fancy display windows, São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro do not look the same as they look from their outskirts, from the barrios with their miserable little shacks... On the periphery things scream at you. In the center, the mechanisms of exploitation are invisible. On the margin you can see them with the naked eye. (Boff, 1985:40)

Boff acclaims the impact the institutional Church has had on the promotion of social justice in places where it has encouraged the paradigm of Base Christian Community and opted decisively for the poor and the marginalised. Boff suggests that when this happens the Church is no longer on the periphery of the struggles of the people but becomes an intrinsic component in their relentless drive towards liberation: “The Church is no longer a Church simply for the poor and the unprotected. Now it is a Church made up of the poor and unprotected” (Boff, 1989:203). Sobrino’s comments are particularly pertinent in this regard: “A church that *ex hypothesi* has abandoned the people in its forward march cannot afterward try to put itself in the vanguard of the people” (Sobrino, 1990:98). Gomez de Souza suggests that it is incumbent on the Church to assist people in situations of great social and political upheaval to find their own prophetic voice so that they can overcome the persecution that they are subjected to:

Now if we want to analyze mechanisms and structures of domination, we must do so by answering the problems raised by the people’s struggle; our analysis must be in the service of their struggles... And those actually involved in the struggle should pose the problems that are to be examined on the level of analysis. (Gomez de Souza, 1981:15-16)

Fox reveals how the Asian Church has re-defined its mission in terms of empowering people to assume greater responsibility over their lives rather than accumulating more conversions to the Church: “I see this model of Church in dialogue with the world, giving and taking, serving and learning, gaining grounds in many parts of the Church” (Fox, 2003:238). Gutiérrez highlights how Base Christian Communities are deeply committed to the defence of human rights and raising the level of awareness of its members to their

entitlements and to their capacity to bring about social change: “In this struggle, the people are gradually going to take cognizance of the fact that they are a social class, a race, a culture, an active subject of revolution and the construction of a different society” (Gutiérrez, 1981:113). There is a frequent progression to action whether in basic health care, literacy programmes, local co-operatives or human rights initiatives. The faith of the community is no longer palliative, inducing resignation or fatalism, but attributes real importance to the participation of ordinary people in the task of shaping their own destinies. Chopp captures this succinctly: “The purpose of liberating education is for persons to be able to “name the world,” to be subjects in their own history” (Chopp, 1992:21). Gutiérrez heightens the importance of educating the poor so that no longer blindly conform to all that is expected of them. A new humanity is being moulded, a new level of consciousness is now instilled in “the kind of man who critically analyzes the present controls his destiny and is oriented toward the future” (Gutiérrez, 1972:11). Gutiérrez underlines how this “control” is an expression of freedom and dignity, the starting point and a source of authentic human development:

There is no true commitment to solidarity with the poor if one sees them merely as people passively waiting for help. Respecting their status as those who control their own destiny is an indispensable condition for genuine solidarity. (Gutiérrez, 2009:325)

Freire, the Brazilian lay educator, has had a profound influence on the emergence of a new defiance among marginalised people in Base Christian Communities across Latin America. In his book *Pedagogy of Freedom, Ethics, Democracy and Civil Courage* (1998), Freire illustrates how the key to mobilising the poor to be a force for social transformation is to firstly make them aware of socio-economic structures that have immobilised them and then provide tools for breaking out of such immobility. Education, as understood by Freire, stimulates consciousness to emerge through constant problem-posing in which persons think about the problem and its social context in a critical fashion. Freire’s word for this process—conscientization—has become a symbol of the possibility of dignity and power being restored to the poor, as they are “conscientized” to their actual situation and opt to change it:

A deepened consciousness of their situation leads people to apprehend that situation as an historical reality susceptible of transformation. Resignation gives way to the drive for transformation and inquiry, over which men feel themselves to be in control. (Freire, 1998:11)

Through the process of teaching literacy to the people on the margins, Freire intended also to liberate them from socio-cultural enslavement by becoming aware of the real causes of their oppression and of their capacity to take control of their destiny. ‘The Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops’ in Medellin reiterates this view and identifies how structural injustice has created dependency and poverty among communities of the poor to a point where fundamental human rights are being violated. The Bishops recognise that conscientization is an integral to the “dynamic process of awakening and organisation of the popular sectors, which are capable of pressing public officials who are often impotent in their social projects without popular support” (Medellin, 1968:no.2.18). Kirby reveals how Base Christian Communities have contributed to a new awakening among the poor of the importance of education in their struggle for a more just social order that reflects their needs and aspirations:

Basic communities and the various church organisations that are committed to liberation now provide the structures for a conscientising education. In fact, it can be said that basic communities themselves are a result of oppressed people becoming aware, due to conscientisation, and discovering their own power and worth. (Kirby, 1981:37)

Base Christian Communities are grounded on the conviction that the people have the inalienable right to self-expression, and, the more they are equipped with the necessary skills and training, the more likely they are to take concerted action to overcome their impoverishment. Boff reveals how these communities implement programmes that play “a great role by conscientizing the people as to their rights, giving them the tools to analyze their situation, and by denouncing the injustices they suffer” (Boff, 1985: 129). The poor in these communities have a profound sense of justice, regularly organising protest marches to object to their adverse social conditions or demonstrations to resist land takeovers, all in their endeavour to assert their right to articulate their vehement opposition to the oppressive conditions that are inflicted on them by a society that is indifferent to their plight. Boff points out that “in this way, the community serves an undeniably critical and demystifying function” (Boff, 1985:129). Comblin clarifies the nature of the freedom communities of the poor experience when they channel their collective energy to promote a radical upheaval in the dominant social order that affords privileges to a few at the expense of many:

There is freedom when horizontal relationships appear among equals-when large numbers acknowledge one another as brothers and sisters and cooperate with one another, without any of them arrogating to themselves special privileges over the others.(Comblin, 1993:149)

Romero believed that an educated poor would become an empowered poor, building their lives on sound Christian values and creating a new dynamic that gives primacy to “preparing oneself to serve and to give to others” over and above the “hope of becoming rich and having the power to dominate” (Romero in Brockman, 1998:31). Romero invited the poor to critically engage in the historical reality in which they lived so that they would come to understand the structural dimension of oppression and its tragic consequences. Romero was in no doubt that a more organised, educated people could take hold of the reins of their own history and become a historical force for change. He initiated pastoral programmes that provided the poor with opportunities to improve their skills and understand their entitlements so that they could become participants in moulding a new history for themselves and their communities:

The world of the poor teaches us that liberation will arrive only when the poor are not simply on the receiving end of handouts from governments or from the churches, but when they themselves are the masters and protagonists of their own struggle and liberation. (Romero, 1985:184)

Aquino offers an interesting perspective on the role Liberation Theology has played in helping to empower marginalised women throughout the world suggesting that the feminism that emerged from Latin America provides a critical framework to analyze systematic injustice, both locally and globally, to determine effective strategies for its elimination and the actualization of authentic justice” (Aquino, 2002:136). Aquino underlines the contribution of theology to the task of promoting a new level of critical engagement among marginalised peoples so that collectively they can take concerted action to address the social inequities that they have to endure. In defining what she considers to be the most pressing issues that humanity, and women in particular, needs to confront, Aquino seeks to “use the power of theology with its liberation traditions as a religious force which contributes to personal and social transformation and the elimination of suffering born of violence and social injustice” (Aquino, 2002:139). Russell suggests that Liberation Theology strikes a tenuous balance between the need to promote liberative action in the present without losing sight of the realisation that the ideal that humanity is

striving towards has yet to be accomplished. Human aspirations must take cognisance of the intractable social realities of the present if hope is to become a liberating force in history: “There can be little openness for the future apart from shared hope in the possibility of a new human society” (Russell, 1974:163). Boff underlines how ideals remain illusory unless they are embedded in the concrete realities that define the life of a community and that “one must hope in eternity without losing one’s foothold in the struggle for a better tomorrow, even here and now in our own day and age” (Boff, 1985:124).

Segundo maintains that at the heart of Liberation Theology is a relentless commitment to radiating a new hope and optimism into the lives of those most exposed to the ravages of poverty and persecution: “From the very beginning it sheds light on the relationship of love to hope: i.e., to the long-range goal” (Segundo, 1973:109). For Gutiérrez, this goal that civilisation is moving towards is part of a wider interaction between humanity and God that is contained within but not confined to the present: “The encounter is present even now, dynamising humanity’s process of becoming, and projecting it beyond man’s hopes; it will not be planned or predestined” (Gutiérrez, 1973:53). Within this framework, human liberation is intimately bound to the evolution of history towards a utopian ideal. Hope now becomes “the driving force of history” (Gutiérrez, 1988:219) and draws humanity into “the very heart of history, in the midst of a single process of liberation which leads that history to its fulfilment in the definitive encounter with God” (Gutiérrez, 1988:223-224). Sobrino recognises the importance of grounding utopian ideals in the realities of this world: “It thrives on the love of those who commit themselves in solidarity with the poor and who generously offer their lives for the sake of the poor” (Sobrino, 2008:82). Sobrino cautions that if humanity abdicates its responsibility to promote change in the world civilisation would drift irrevocably towards its “aporia...the point at which there really seems to be no way through, namely, at the point of the powerlessness of love against injustice” (Sobrino, 1985:34-35). Sobrino identifies the symmetry that exists between the pursuit of the utopian ideal in history and the building of God’s kingdom: “The utopia is like a powerful magnet. It mobilizes. It moves human being time and again to give their best to make the Reign come true” (Sobrino, 1993:69). Sobrino re-asserts the indissoluble tie between hope and justice, urging believers to allow hope to become a springboard to social change:

Moreover, this hope, which is maintained at the practical level through the struggle for justice and which never fully realizes its utopian content but constantly looks for “concrete manifestations” of justice, is the real way of sustaining faith. (Sobrino, 1984:61)

Gutiérrez argues that the utopian vision, like the kingdom, develops in accordance with efforts to enact it. Most broadly, the utopian vision is actualised in this world when all human beings have basic needs met and have the opportunity to develop their minds and intellectual capacities. In effect, the utopian vision becomes a stimulus for social change, urging the oppressed to denounce unacceptable social realities and to anticipate a time when these realities no longer exist: “It is the field of creative imagination which proposes the alternative values to those rejected... Utopia moves forward; it is a projection into the future, a dynamic and mobilizing factor in history” (Gutiérrez, 1988:218-219). Rather than leading away from engagement with the reality of the world, utopian thinking articulated by Gutiérrez confronts this reality in order to transform it. It thereby acts as a conduit between faith and political action:

Faith and political action will not enter into a correct and fruitful relationship except through the effort to create a new type of person in a different society, that is, except through utopia.... This plan provides the basis for the struggle for better living conditions. Political liberation appears as a path toward the utopia of a freer, more human humankind, the protagonist of its own history. (Gutiérrez, 1988:221)

Sobrino underscores the importance of carrying out historical projects without making these projects absolute in the process. The utopian vision “inspires us to be effective in the liberation process and at the same time to keep on humanizing the human beings who are the movers behind this process” (Sobrino, 1981:186). Webb maintains that Liberation Theology, and the theology of Gustavo Gutiérrez in particular, pushes our understanding of hope onto a new plain, making it less esoteric and more palpable, heightening “the conscious awareness that we as human beings are the determining subjects of our own history and, as such, are required by this very same hope to commit ourselves to social praxis” (Webb, 2008:133). Libânio captures the recurring emphasis in Liberation Theology on the need to project beyond the shortcomings of the prevailing social order and make concrete as yet unrealised goals and possibilities:

Utopia expresses a human aspiration toward a truly just order, a social world that is wholly human, which corresponds to the dreams, needs, and deepest aspirations of human life. It is the image of a perfect

society, which acts as a horizon and guideline for a real historical project or for the desire for an alternative project to the present situation. (Libânio , 1993:281)

Sobrino insists that a prophetic Church remains cognisant of God's ongoing participation in the journey of humanity towards its future aspirations. God is an intrinsic component in the journey of humanity towards its fulfillment: "... God draws history forward that it may give more of itself, and inspires all social processes to move in the direction of justice, peace, and a communion of sisters and brothers" (Sobrino, 1990:178). Muñoz maintains that the Base Christian Communities facilitate a new level of engagement among people in their social environs and enable them to move forward in solidarity towards the utopian ideal that God alone can make possible: "The God of our deliverance comes to us in the inspiring utopian of a universal relationship of love, a utopian that mobilizes us for action" (Muñoz, 1993:93). For Sobrino, the people in these communities see that "God is with them. Now they are no longer orphans... Their knowledge is that they are with God in their historical hope" (Sobrino, 1985:138). Each Base Christian Community is animated by this unrelenting conviction that the source of their faith partakes with them in their struggle for justice:

Day by day Jesus instills in the poor a spirit of commitment, generosity, struggle, and unbounded dedication to the cause of the people's liberation. Day by day Jesus generates in them the hope that liberation and the reign of God will come-despite the enormous obstacles in its way. (Sobrino, 1985:173-174)

3.4.4 Communities Animated by the Potency of God's Grace

The people in Base Christian Communities have an unwavering conviction that God is intrinsically part of their history, strengthening them through their persecution and leading them closer to their liberation. Boff underlines how these communities are attuned to the deeper realm of the spiritual and recognise God's presence in the myriad of activities that define the life of the community. The community recognise "God's grace impregnating the concrete events of its life" and its members are susceptible to "this fine sense of the religious dimension to be found in all stages of human life" (Boff, 1985:130). Boff illustrates how this predisposition towards God's relentless involvement in their history is particularly striking in the liturgical celebrations that are integral to the identity of each Base Christian Community. The liturgies provide the opportunity for the people to

proclaim their profound conviction that they are not alone as they journey towards the day when the freedom that they aspire towards will be reached: “A people that knows how to celebrate is a people with hope. They are no longer a wholly oppressed people but a people who march toward their liberation” (Boff, 1985:130). Sobrino acclaims the enthusiasm and vibrancy with which the poor give expression to their faith in Base Christian Communities and reflects the affinity that exists between the people and God. For Sobrino, communities of the poor mediate “a profound experience of the mystery of God” and that the discovery of a “transcendent God comes through contact with the God... hidden in the little ones, crucified on the cross of Jesus and on the countless crosses of the oppressed of our day” (Sobrino, 1984:56). Comblin too underlines how God’s presence is keenly felt in the struggles of those who are exposed to the ravages of history, a subliminal presence concealed within the story of the poor and their stoic resolve to overcome their persecution:

Grace produces a history, not the one that is written, but the one that is experienced in the hidden part of the world. It produces a parallel history of those who suffer in the midst of the triumphs of the conquerors and the persecuted. Grace is present in the hidden history of the poor. (Comblin, 1993:213)

Gutiérrez maintains that God’s grace provides a deeper, mystical meaning to the encounters that define human existence, and, in so doing, gives added significance to the activities of Base Christian Communities in the world today: “God’s dwelling in history is not simple and obvious, so that it may be found quickly, directly, and unmistakably. God is present in human history with its tensions, successes, and conflicts, but finding God requires a search” (Gutiérrez, 1991:80). Gutiérrez establishes an indivisible union between the realm of the spiritual and domain of human interaction: “At the root of every spirituality there is a particular experience that is had by concrete persons living at a particular time” (Gutiérrez, 2005:37). In *We Drink from our own Wells* (2005), Gutiérrez reveals how the distinctive identity of a faith community is often defined by personal or collective experiences of pain or joy of the community, “intense moments of encounter with the Lord” (Gutiérrez, 2005:42), that forge a permanent seal between the community and God. Comblin maintains that “God’s graces in individuals are connected and form one single grace. God does not open to one person alone but to each person within his or her community” (Comblin, 1993:208). Sobrino emphasises how this encounter with God

occurs as a collective experience within the community through their shared resilience and unstinting solidarity in the face of great persecution. Sobrino captures how God's grace has its own distinctive quality when experienced within a community:

This is the most splendid, most familiar, level of solidarity: the encounter with God as community, as a people internally differentiated, yes, but as a people from start to finish, within which each member, in his or her faith, leads and carries along, while being led and carried by, all of the others. (Sobrino, 1993:255)

Base Christian Communities create the space for people to reflect on their experience in the light of their faith tradition and become attuned to a deeper, spiritual undercurrent that animates their lives. Boff underlines the vibrant symmetry these communities create between the world of liturgical celebration and the everyday world that gives rise to this celebration. Religious expression assumes the culture of the people, their way of life, their joviality and the popular devotion to the saints, processions, feasts in honour of the Virgin and the Trinity that is evident in these communities enables the people to give expression to their deepest needs and convictions: "Through their own religiosity the people, in many parts of the world, have been able to discover the meaning of life, keep their faith alive, and nourish their trust" (Boff, 1985:130). Comblin captures how these communities effectively re-claim the rituals and devotional practices that have inherited from the ruling classes who, in many instances, usurped the real meaning of these practices to underscore their control and dominance. Comblin maintains that given that "these traditional expressions of popular piety have been deflected by the dominators and placed in the service of domination" it is nevertheless possible "to restore to the poor the riches of their past... Popular piety can be delivered from its distortions" (Comblin, 1993:163-164). Comblin suggests that the traditional patterns of worship now "take on liberative meanings" and provide a gateway for God to intervene in their history (Comblin, 1993:164). Magaña underscores the particular affinity that exists between these communities and Mary, who, in her capacity as "Mother of the poor" becomes a vivifying symbol of God's enduring love for the oppressed:

She becomes once more the simple woman, the woman of the people, the mother of Jesus the carpenter's son, in solidarity with her folk and with the hopes of her people, handmaid of that Lord who topples the mighty from their thrones and exalts the humble, who fills the poor with good things and sends the rich empty away. (Magaña, 1993:188)

Ferro reveals how the Base Christian Communities identify ways of “systematizing” their individual and collective experience of God: “There is a plethora of pamphlets, bulletins, songs, poetic pieces, and plays... They bring together the living experience of the community, work it up, and then return it to the community” (Ferro, 1981:32). Sobrino recognises how the worship of the community reflects the exuberance of the poor and their susceptibility to God’s unrelenting involvement in their lives: “The poor suffer, yes; but they do not sorrow. To live with joy, to be glad to be alive, is to live with ultimate meaning-with the ability to be grateful and to celebrate, the ability to be for others and be with others” (Sobrino, 1993:251-252). Of particular importance to these communities are the new popular hymns, often composed by members of the community, and the prayers of petition that are startling in the very concrete nature of their appeals and in the enduring conviction that God is close at hand. Boff explains that when the community prays, it recalls “all of the problems, oppressions, oppressors, hardships as well as victories, successes, and ongoing projects of the community” (Boff, 1985:130). Boff discovers in all aspects of their liturgical life evidence that the “base ecclesial communities not only strengthen the faith of the people, which would be enough in itself, but also foster creativity in the search for the proper expression of living out faith” (Boff, 1985:130). Muñoz underlines the importance these communities attribute to the process of translating grace into their worship experience so that the people can further consolidate their encounter with God:

It happens in a special way when the community comes together for *prayer*: prayers of petition or gratuitous praise, moments of talk and silence, and rituals of gesture and song. These are the moments when the people consciously meet their God, take repose in God, enjoy God’s presence, and share the food and drink they need to keep moving on in hope. (Muñoz, 1981:156)

Boff understands that the very concrete expressions of service and love define these communities and make their joyous celebrations all the more authentic. The poor recognise that the more they give expression to their love of God in their service to the community, the more they actualise the power of God’s love in the immediacy of their world: “The fullness of love is not to be loved but to love. This is true for the human being, and this is true for God” (Boff, 1989:161). In effect, the liturgical life of these communities is an expression of a living faith that finds a resonance in all aspects of community life. Boff realises that central to the faith life of these communities is the understanding that “it is not

enough that faith be alive. It must also be true. And faith is only true when it becomes love and justice” (Boff, 1989:85). Comblin underlines the potential for grace to become a potent force for change in the world:

God’s grace is not ineffectual. It does not remain on the purely spiritual level, remote from this earthly history. Its effects are perceptible even if they do not bring about in this world what is reserved for the end of time. (Comblin, 1993:214)

For Comblin, the activity of God’s grace manifests itself in “the continuum of human action” filtering out from the community to impact in the wider social sphere” (Comblin, 1993:212). Sobrino insists that whilst prayer and meditation draw the community into the mystery of God’s grace, this in turn must impel the members to give expression to this mystery in their lives: “The culmination of grace is experienced in the gift of new hands with which to build a new creation” (Sobrino, 1984:61). Sobrino underlines how the distinctive Christian witness that is prevalent in Base Christian Communities creates an opening for God’s grace to resonate in history: “... the historical characteristics of the practice of justice are helpful and even in some way necessary if there is to be a process that makes possible the Christian experience of God” (Sobrino, 1984:54). Sobrino argues that the practice of justice concretises God’s grace in history, given that an “essential part of God’s historical manifestation is his demonstration of partiality to the poor and the oppressed. A love that did not take this aspect of the reality of God into consideration could hardly serve as the channel for an experience of this God” (Sobrino, 1984:55).

Gutiérrez maintains that the discovery of God’s grace “brings with it a deeper penetration into God’s gratuitous love as the source of everything else and as the power that sweeps us along with it” (Gutiérrez, 2005:93). For Gutiérrez, God is the “Go’el” of the people in captivity, the one who shields and protects as a relative or friend would, and forges an “ineradicable seal” with them in their journey towards liberation (Gutiérrez, 1991:22). McAfee Brown believes that Gutiérrez places God’s grace in the context God’s intimate involvement in the story of humanity that continues through history: “In Jesus, God is not only revealed in history, God becomes history; that is to say, God “pitches a tent” in the midst of our human situation and shares it fully” (McAfee Brown, 1990:113). O’ Sullivan reflects on the implications of the symmetry Gutiérrez establishes between this preferential love of the biblical God for the poor and the ongoing revelation of that same love through history: “This saving grace is the grace of charity. It does not exist in the abstract, but is

incarnated in human love, so that human love is impregnated, and brought to its fullness, by it” (O’ Sullivan, 1986:19). Gutiérrez insists that this gesture on God’s part must be met by a decisive response on the part of those who are receptive to this life force in their lives:

The gift of God’s love is the source of our being and puts its impress on our lives. We have been made by love and for love. Only by loving, then, can we fulfil ourselves as persons; that is how we respond to the initiative taken by God’s love. (Gutiérrez, 2005:109-110)

Gutiérrez maintains that God’s grace initiates a process of conversion that challenges the individual to see beyond the immediacy of their own lives and reach out in solidarity with those who are alienated and oppressed in the world today: “Our conversion to the Lord implies this conversion to the neighbour ... it means thinking, feeling, and living as Christ-present in exploited and alienated persons” (Gutiérrez, 1988:194). Sobrino echoes this view and maintains that through this process of embracing the burdens of the poor humanity becomes “assimilated into the reality of God” (Sobrino, 1984:46). Sobrino believes that the recipients of God’s gift of grace have the responsibility to contribute to the outpouring of this grace among those most in need:

At the center of our faith is the fact that God has loved us first, and that a response to that love, a love for our brother and sisters, has its life from, and is imbued with the power of, being loved by God. (Sobrino, 1993:248)

Gutiérrez contends that “the grace of God is present in every act of authentic human love.” (Gutiérrez, 1990:138) “Filiation” now becomes the specific character of God’s saving grace of love: “... the Father’s love... makes us his daughters and sons... transforms us, making us more fully human, more fully brothers and sisters to all” (Gutiérrez, 1983:67). Gutiérrez insists God is present in those “disfigured by oppression, despoliation, and alienation” and “an act of love towards them is an act of love towards God” (Gutiérrez, 1988:191-192). O’ Sullivan reflects on how Gutiérrez interprets grace not as an esoteric, mystical experience contained within the inner realms of each individual but as a life force that filters out from the inner echelons of those receptive to its power to impact on civilisation. O’ Sullivan accepts that Gutiérrez places the onus firmly on humanity to “construct a society of brothers and sisters under the impact of the grace of filiation” (O’ Sullivan, 1986:108). Gutiérrez underlines the potential for grace to empower each person

to love others as brothers and sisters and testify to the active presence of the God in history:

Every person who is poor and forgotten is, like Bethlehem, unimportant, but from this person the Lord comes to us... When we serve the poor we serve the Christ in whom we believe; when we are in solidarity with the neediest we discern the lowly reality of the son of man. (Gutiérrez, 1991:88)

Welch suggests that this solidarity stirs something within the individual encourages the individual to delve deeper within themselves and discover reserves of love and compassion for those who are suffering: “Thus, solidarity is located in an explicitly circular pattern: it emerges as central only from an already existing identification with the oppressed and it evokes further identification a with the oppressed” (Welch, 1985:46). Romero too acclaims how compassion for the poor draws humanity closer to God and that “everyone concerned for the hungry, the naked, the poor, for those who have vanished in police custody, for the tortured, for prisoners, for all flesh that suffers, has God close at hand” (Romero in Brockman, 1998:34). Sobrino cautions that the “practice of justice brings us close to the mystery of the God of life; it also exposes us to temptation against this mystery. This practice makes it impossible for us to gloss over the dark side of faith” (Sobrino, 1984:60). God’s grace is at its most potent in those very situations that threaten its existence. This discovery, paradoxically a joyful one, is of no small significance as it “highlights the meaning of our life as a Christian life, and roots us in the place where we have begun to know who we are” (Sobrino, 1985:97). Sobrino recognises how the poor give prominence to the force of love in their lives and draw God into the midst of their history. The poor recognise the transcendent in their midst, sharing in their journey and urging them toward liberation and peace. His observations on Romero are particularly apt in this regard:

Among the poor he discovered that God is God become small- a suffering God, a crucified God. But this also led him to sound the depths of the mystery of an ever greater, transcendent God, the last reserve of truth, goodness, and humanity, on whom we human beings can rely. (Sobrino, 1990:16)

3.5 Looking to the Future – the Need for a Fresh Impetus

This thesis proposes that Base Christian Communities signal a new direction for the universal Church and paves the way for a more authentic and a more compassionate way of living in accordance with the Gospel. It is important to examine the reservations of people opposed to the ecclesial vision envisaged in Liberation Theology with a view to ascertaining a deeper understanding of the resistance to this paradigm of Church. Section 3.5.1 (pp.136-139) examines the accusation levelled against theologians of liberation that in embracing Marxism social analysis they have obscured the deeper faith dimension to the struggle for liberation. Section 3.5.2 (pp.139-142) critiques the view that Liberation Theology interprets the central precepts of the Christian faith from a purely political perspective, and, in so doing, dilutes the real significance of the faith tradition. Section 3.5.3 (pp.142-146) explores how Liberation Theology needs to broaden its inquiry beyond the economically oppressed to accommodate issues pertaining to the struggles of other marginalised movements in their pursuit of justice. The aim of this section is to examine the views of opposing voices from within the Church to the theology of liberation with a view to creating a new consensus between previously divided elements within the Church as to the potential of Base Christian Communities to breathe new life into the Church's mission in the world.

McGovern reflects on the need for a new partnership between proponents of this ecclesial dynamism and the hierarchy so that the alliance between the grassroots and the institution can be strengthened: "Attitudes and decisions in the institutional church will greatly affect the future of both liberation theology and the base communities. Movements cut off from support of the church are unlikely to have great impact" (McGovern, 1989:231). McGovern recognises that whilst the institutional Church in the past has stated its solidarity with the poor and has acknowledged their liberative efforts, in practice, however, "an apparent trend in the appointment of new bishops raises doubts about the church's role in any new social transformations... orthodoxy and reasserting church authority appear to outweigh social concerns" (McGovern, 1989:231). Segundo sees evidence of a reluctance among conservative elements in the Church hierarchy to recognise the legitimacy of this paradigm of Church. Segundo cautions that if the institutional Church continues to choose bishops "precisely for their uniformity and conformity to Rome's orientation more than for their charisma of leadership", it risks distancing itself from the real concerns of the people

(Segundo, 1985:148). Theologians of liberation, for their part, need to clarify elements of their theology that are open to mis-interpretation that have led to division and mistrust in the past even among proponents of reform in the Church. In particular, these theologians have a responsibility to ensure that their ecclesiology is not too closely aligned with more subversive movements within and beyond the domain of the Church that equate the pursuit of justice and liberation with more militant forms of popular uprisings (See Section 3.2.2, pp.90-91). The question remains; can Church leaders and theologians of liberation alike work together in a spirit of dialogue and partnership to channel their collective aspirations for the Church in a way that gives added impetus to the promotion of Base Christian Communities in the world today?

3.5.1 Clarifying the Uneasy Alliance between Liberation Theology and Marxism

The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued ‘Instruction on Certain Aspects of the “Theology of Liberation”’, *Liberatis Nuntius*, in 1984 which helps to clarify the reasons why the Vatican has been cautious about giving legitimacy both to this ecclesial model and to the theological rationale that accompanied it. The primary concern of the Vatican’s office for doctrinal orthodoxy is that the “all –embracing conception of reality” by Marx “imposes its logic and leads the “theologies of liberation” to accept a series of positions which are incompatible with the Christian vision of humanity” (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in Haight, 1985:280-281). McGovern contends that the document sheds light on the scepticism that exists among critics of Liberation Theology towards the perceived alliance between Christian liberative praxis and Marxist social analysis. Those most vociferous in their opposition to the theology of liberation believe that the core tenets of the Christian tradition are somewhat compromised when viewed from a purely political perspective:

Nearly all the criticisms focus on the dangers of using Marxist ideas or espousing socialism. These political concern, moreover, prompt most of the criticisms of liberation theology as a whole. (McGovern, 1989:228)

In their joint remarks on the 1984 Instruction, Leonardo and Clodovis Boff give their appraisal of the use of Marxist analysis in the theology of liberation and emphasise how the sphere of inquiry that underscores the theology of liberation is far wider than the elements of Marxist analysis it employs: “Such horizon embraces an ethic, a mysticism,

and an eschatology which owe nothing to Marxism” (Boff and Boff, 1984:909). Segundo believes that theologians in Latin America take elements of Marxist analysis and “they complement and correct these elements with analytical elements from other sources” (Segundo, 1985:96). Segundo points out that liberation theology is justified in the selective use of Marxist social analysis to corroborate a clearer picture of the underlying structural causes to poverty while conceding readily that every social analysis must be subjected to a rigorous “epistemological critique” (Segundo, 1985:97). In effect, Liberation Theology looks to the social sciences to provide conceptual instruments to understand the reality wherein theology must sink its roots. Vidales explains how theologians of liberation need an appropriate hermeneutics to facilitate a rigorous analysis of the underlying causes of dependency and social destitution: “... we need a hermeneutics that is open and sensitive to the history of our peoples, the geography of hunger, the culture of violence, the language of voiceless masses, the world of oppression, and the structures of an unjust social order that is badly in need of God’s message of freedom” (Vidales, 1979:48). Implicit in this assessment is the recognition that structural imbalances in society are grasped more exactly by adopting a proven blueprint for social analysis, and that, given this reasoning, the theologian needs to move outside specifically theological concepts. Lane appositely remarks: “the praxis of transformation will only succeed to the extent that it properly understands the intricacies of the situation that needs to be changed” (Lane, 1984:83).

Gutiérrez realises that Marxist analysis serves heuristically to discern the evil under-layer to social injustice and poses the questions essential to enabling people to free themselves from the stranglehold of oppression. Gutiérrez argues, as Marx did, that the revolutionary potential of the poor “is something to be developed and organized, with a view to concrete efficaciousness in history” (Gutiérrez, 1983:97). Gutiérrez accepts the convergence between the Marxist utopian vision and the ideals of the kingdom promoted in the Gospel and understands that the pathway to a more just and equitable society can only be reached when the popular classes take concerted action to radically change the situation of exploitation that they find themselves in: “In the struggle, the people gain greater and greater consciousness of being a social, the active subject of the revolution and of the construction of a different society” (Gutiérrez, 1983:97). Yet, Gutiérrez is quick to point out that “an economically based determinist view of class struggle is completely alien to liberation theology” (Gutiérrez, 1986:71). Gutiérrez emphasises the synergy that must exist between faith and politics if the needs of those most exposed to hostile social forces

are to be fully understood and if the action that evolves out of this understanding is to be both effective and meaningful:

It is inevitable that the dimension of politics and the dimension of faith will be out of phase with each other at times. Sometimes one aspect will enjoy more growth than the other. The requirement of unity is a basic one, rooted in the biblical message and the people's situation; but it must be pondered, worked out, and systematized. (Gutiérrez, 1981:114)

Boff clarifies how theologians of liberation locate the struggle for freedom within a wider Christian perspective, and, in so doing give it deeper meaning and resonance: "In the theology of liberation, Marxism is never dealt with in and for itself. It is always examined with the poor as starting point, and for the sake of the poor... Marxism is set against the broader horizon of faith" (Boff, 1993:13). Boff offers a penetrating insight into how the theologians of liberation assimilate the "transforming energy" of the faith tradition into their critique of the shortcomings of the social order and advocate a course of action that correlates with all that this tradition discloses (Boff, 1993:17). For Boff, the liberative exploits of the popular classes "emerges from action and leads to action, and the round trip is steeped and wrapped in the atmosphere of faith from start to finish. From an analysis of the reality of the oppressed, it moves through the word of God, finally to arrive at concrete practice" (Boff, 1993:20). McGovern underlines how Marxist concepts take on a whole new meaning when interpreted in light of the Christian faith tradition:

Liberation Theology makes use of Marxist concepts but these concepts do not retain the same meanings they have in classic Marxism. "Praxis" connotes the living out of the Christian faith, not Marxist tactics of change. "Class struggle" expresses the reality of social conflict in Latin America, not a program to stir up hatred or to eliminate some ruling class. (McGovern, 1989:230)

Gutiérrez recognises the need to construct a theological framework to give credibility and direction to the political aspirations of the oppressed without obscuring the deeper faith dimension to this process. In *The Truth Shall Make You Free* (1986), Gutiérrez distinguishes between "Marxist analysis" and "Marxism" viewing the latter as "an all-embracing view of life and thus excludes the Christian faith and its requirements" (Gutiérrez, 1986:61). Gutiérrez is happy to embrace aspects of Marxist social science to help him formulate a theology that has socio-political implications but, in a significant shift from Marxist ideology, rules out "any totalitarian version of history that denies the

freedom of the human person” (Gutiérrez, 1986:61). For him, theology’s task is to elevate the historical process beyond the domain of the political and the economic and become “aware of deeper changes that can take place in the human person, of the search for a different kind of human being” (Gutiérrez, 1986:65). Gutiérrez reflects on the surge towards emancipation that is palpable in these communities of the poor from a faith perspective: “How are Christians to live their faith, their hope, and their love amid a conflict that takes the form of class struggle?” (Gutiérrez, 1986:70). Gutiérrez accentuates the human qualities necessary for utopian aspirations to be realised in history insisting that “the real issue here, the real requirement, is solidarity” (Gutiérrez, 1986:76). Gutiérrez’ primary concern lies not in promoting a struggle ‘against others’ but ‘for others’ and in articulating a theology that unveils God’s presence in the midst of this struggle:

I continue to be convinced-and the practice of the poor confirms me in this conviction-that a fertile, imaginative challenge lies in ‘contemplating in action’, in action which transforms history. I am referring to finding God in the poor, in our solidarity with the struggle of the oppressed, and in a faith full of hope and gladness lived out in the very heart of a liberation process whose agents are the popular classes themselves. (Gutiérrez, 1983:99)

3.5.2 Liberation Theology – Moving to New Horizons or Reductionist?

Liberatis Nuntius has deep reservations that Liberation Theology interprets the core tenets of the Christian message in terms of class struggle and thereby emasculates rather than unveils the real significance of the faith tradition (See Section 3.2.2, pp.90-91). The recurring aberration in Liberation Theology, according to the document, is that in appearing to define the Church’s mission in exclusively political terms these theologians are effectively sacrificing the deeper relevance of the Christian tradition to the vagaries of history: “In this way they pervert the Christian meaning of the poor, and they transform the fight for the rights of the poor into a class fight within the ideological perspective of the class struggle” (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in Haight, 1985:283-284). The ‘Instruction’ rejected the interpretation of religious phenomena such as the Exodus and the Eucharist from the narrow perspective of class struggle explaining that the “mistake here is not in bringing attention to a political dimension of the readings of Scripture, but in making of this one dimension the principal or exclusive component” (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in Haight, 1985:285). The document speaks of an “inversion of symbols” whereby “the Eucharist is no longer to be understood as the real sacramental

presence of the reconciling sacrifice, and as the Body and Blood of Christ” (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in Haight, 1985:286). In countering this implied criticism of Liberation Theology, Carroll cites Zappone in illustrating how the theologians of liberation assimilate the Eucharist in creative ways into the present history of the people so that it can sustain them in the immediacy of the challenges that they are confronted with in their lives: “The liturgy of the word should combine the traditional word with the people’s word. And the bread offered should be eaten in solidarity with the poor” (Carroll, 1987:69). Rather than obscuring the deeper significance of the scriptural or doctrinal texts that the Church has inherited through history, Carroll contends that “liberation theology has simply recovered an understanding overlaid by an excessively liturgical or “spiritual” interpretation of these texts” (Carroll, 1987:84).

Liberatis Nuntius contests that Marxist social analysis imposes a framework on Liberation Theology that confines salvation to the vicissitudes of history and articulates a vision for humanity that loses its transcendental dimension: “To some it even seems that the necessary struggle for human justice and freedom in the economic and political sense constitutes the whole essence of salvation. For them, the Gospel is reduced to a purely earthly gospel” (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in Haight, 1985:277). Against Marx’s immanentist horizon, Gutiérrez emphasises how human emancipation happens in the context of the unfolding of salvation in history (See Section 3.3.1, pp.95-98). Within this framework, the liberative efforts of humanity to break free from servitude create the conditions for God’s salvific activity to intervene in history:

Thus when we say that men and women actualize themselves by carrying on the work of creation through their labours, we are asserting that they are operating within the framework of God’s salvific work from the very first.... To work to transform the world is to save. (Gutiérrez in Nickoloff, 1996:238-239)

O’ Sullivan underlines how Gutiérrez adapts Marxist social analysis as a “mediating rationality” on which to ground the overriding conviction that God works through humanity to save history. Marxist social science provides the necessary analytical tools to decipher ways humanity can play its part in contributing to the story of salvation: “The totalizing principle in Gutiérrez’ theology is the Christian reality of salvation, not the Marxist praxis of immanent historical liberation... it is that reality which inspires and effects liberation as its concretizing principle of response to the poor, and to the world in

which they are” (O’ Sullivan, 1986:66). Carroll suggests that Liberation Theology breaks free from the “arid slogans” of traditional theology and promotes a new orientation in theological inquiry that reconciles God with the story of humanity. Far from diminishing the role of God in civilisation, Carroll suggests that these theologians articulate a “spirituality of liberation” that uncovers a sense of the transcendent in the midst of the everyday realities that define the life of the people:

Liberation Theology points to an encounter with God in the struggle for food, for justice and for life. Because of its closeness to the ‘grassroots Church’ it can frequently articulate vibrant, celebratory ways of living the faith, ways of dealing with illness, poverty, suffering and death. (Carroll, 1987:68)

Harvey Cox alludes to how the continuous and universal nature of salvation is deemed by the Vatican to be the most contentious aspect of his theology. Cox argues that the debate between theologians of liberation and The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith ultimately hinged on Cardinal Ratzinger’s assertion that if their ideas were to be accepted “then some expressions and manifestations of the Roman Catholic church might not be seen as carrying the full presence of the church of Christ” (Cox, 1988:99). Hebblethwaite acclaims the contribution of Liberation Theology in broadening the parameters of God’s activity in the world beyond the confines of Catholicism and in illuminating how “the Spirit was still at work in the world” penetrating through the pores of history “through the men and women, and through some of the movements in the present age” (Hebblethwaite in Cox, 1988:87). Ferm explains that Liberation Theology widens the scope of God’s involvement in history beyond traditional ecclesial boundaries to encompass the myriad of ways in which this ongoing creative presence works through humanity to draw civilisation closer to its liberation. Ferm argues that the theology of liberation does not minimise God’s role in the evolution of civilisation but entrusts humanity with the responsibility to mediate this presence in the world: “Latin American liberation theologians are wary of setting up what they consider to be an artificial distinction between action and reflection, between immanence and transcendence, between humanity and God. For them humanity is the locus of the divine” (Ferm, 1985: 314). In effect, humanity and God become co-creators in the task of forging a new way for humanity to live together, a project promoted within but not confined to the movement of universal Church. Boff reflects on the deeper spiritual current inherent in Liberation Theology that evokes rather than denies a sense of

“the mystery of the universe and of the human being; a spirituality based on an ethic of responsibility, solidarity and compassion” (Boff, 2007:10). McGovern underlines how Liberation Theology has unearthed a depth dimension to the finite realities that define the human struggle for emancipation and has helped to facilitate a new awakening among the people of God’s recurring participation in their history:

The initial impulse of liberation theology came from a new Christian awareness of the sufferings of the poor and a conviction that God remains present and active in the struggles of the poor to liberate themselves. (McGovern, 1989:230)

3.5.3 Responding to the Call for a More Inclusive and Unifying Theology

The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith cautions against insurgent elements in Liberation Theology that promote instability in the Church and create a divide between those who engage in the class struggle and the establishment. Within the Marxist framework, the popular movement of the people becomes the antithesis of the hierarchy, the antithesis of all institutions, which are seen as oppressive powers: “There is a denunciation of members of the hierarchy and the magisterium as objective representatives of the ruling class which has to be opposed” (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in Haight, 1985:284). The inference is clear and unambiguous; Liberation Theology is undermining the model of governance that has helped to perpetuate the movement of the Church through the ages, and, as such, represents a challenge to “the sacramental and hierarchical structure of the church, which was willed by the Lord himself” (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in Haight, 1985:284). Dorr suggests that this denunciation of certain aspects of Liberation Theology reflects a residual suspicion in the mindset of the hierarchy of anything that might weaken the traditional power base within the Church. The question, he suggests, is whether Christ “willed” a clerical and institutional Church which is “dysfunctional in its exercise of authority” (Dorr, 2004:234). The document underscores the importance of fidelity to the teaching of the magisterium and working within the parameters of the prevailing hierarchical order of the Church:

All priests, religious and lay people who hear this call for justice and who want to work for evangelization and the advancement of mankind will do so in communion with their bishop and with the church, each in accord with his or her own specific ecclesial vocation. (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in Haight, 1985:287)

Segundo suggests that Liberation Theology has set in motion an “irreversible thrust” in the momentum towards the empowerment of the laity: “Countless Christians have committed themselves to a fresh and radical interpretation of their faith, to a new re-experiencing of it in their real lives... not only as isolated individuals but also as influential and sizable groups within the Church” (Segundo, 1976:3). Segundo believes that the document reflects a deep apprehension on the part of the hierarchy that it is “losing its grip on the church of the people” and a reciprocal distrust on the part of the people who “do not distinguish between political authority that can be changed in principle if not through dialogue, and an immovable ecclesiastical authority” (Segundo, 1985:145). de Medina and de Oliveira echo this view believing that the time has come for the hierarchy to break free from the vestiges of power and authority and begin to apportion new responsibilities to the laity in the decision-making dynamic of the Church: “The only solution lies in an understanding of the layperson as one of the terms of participating structure-one of the terms of the power to make decisions bearing on the specific objectives of that person’s church” (de Medina and de Ribeiro in Boff, 1997:31). Segundo senses a reluctance on the part of the hierarchy to concede that the motivation for Liberation Theology continually arises from the spontaneity and the dynamism of the people and their resolute determination to breathe new life into their experience of what it means to be Church:

Therefore the base ecclesial community seems to be, in itself or in principle, a place where the people practice for themselves an analysis of their own praxis... it is clear that they are already the subjects, and not the mere objects, of their history. Their historical strength must stem from the fact that, more or less consciously, they know where to find and how to combat the mechanisms of their oppression. (Segundo, 1985:144)

Brockman acknowledges the defiance that is palpable among leaders at the grassroots of the Church and their unequivocal solidarity with the peasant unions so as to advance the cause of the poor: “Some priests, seeing in the peasant unions a hope for social justice through political pressure, encouraged their development and themselves spoke of social justice and hope for a better world in their preaching” (Brockman, 1984:450). Mich believes that the document cautions the more revolutionary wing of the Church to resist creating “an opposition between the church of the poor and the hierarchical church, by promoting base communities whose members often lack the theological training and capacity to discern” (Mich, 1998:270). Mich detects a clear intent on the part of the hierarchy to re-assert its authority in the face of a perceived threat from the Base Christian

Communities and their tendency to “designate ministers of their choice in accord with the needs of their historic revolutionary mission” and thereby devalue the established authority base of the Church (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in Haight, 1985:284). Mich contends, however, that the document fails to recognise how these communities re-capture the vision and witness of the early Church and give a new impetus to the Church’s mission in the world:

I would argue that the base community movement is a necessary corrective that restores the egalitarian and personal dimensions that are part of the Catholic tradition and rooted in the Johannine community of “beloved disciples”. (Mich, 1998:270)

Challenges to the theology of liberation have also come from women’s movements, indigenous people’s movements and ecological movements. These groups advocate a broadening of the existing sphere of social analysis in the theology of liberation to include racial, ethnic, cultural, and sexual oppression so that each may be viewed as interconnected strands within the wider movement of creation. It has been argued that Liberation Theology restricts its critical analysis to the capitalist system and that “other forms of suffering and oppression besides the economic are either downplayed or omitted from consideration” (Carroll, 1987:71). Boff cautions against defining social exclusion purely from an economic perspective and cautions liberation theologians not to “attend exclusively to the purely socioeconomic aspect of oppression – the aspect of poverty itself – however basic and determining it might be” and to reflect on “other levels of social oppression: racial (blacks), ethnic (Indians), and sexual (women)” (Boff, 1993: 14). James Cone, the North American black theologian, acknowledges how “Latin American theologians’ emphasis upon the class struggle with almost no mention of race oppression, made black theologians suspicious of their white, European identity” (Cone, 1981:266). Welch reiterates this view suggesting that “black theology is the voice of a particular type of oppression ignored in Western academic theology and in the established churches” (Welch, 1985:37). Preman Niles of Sri Lanka captures how Liberation Theology has elevated the needs of the economically poor to the exclusion of many whose poverty lies beyond the narrowed confines of the categories it has constructed: “We detect a certain rigidity in the understanding of who the poor are, a rigidity that leads to exclusivism in spite of some attempts to be open and not overly dogmatic” (Niles, 1981:253).

Carroll believes that it is incumbent on the theologians of liberation to “widen their own purview on injustice, misery and suffering” so that they become more susceptible to the myriad of ways in which “people are denied their rights, whether because of their creed or colour or class or sex” (Carroll, 1987:74). Ferro cites the Ecumenical Congress of Theology held at São Paulo 1980 in emphasising how Liberation Theology has not adequately addressed the needs of women who are marginalised in society: “Even though women participate in the Christian communities, up to now we do not see any specific contribution based on the whole woman’s problem in the theological production of such communities” (Ferro, 1981:33). Ferro urges Liberation Theology to accommodate the contribution of women in the male dominated environs of theological inquiry and create an opening for the voice of women to become a potent stimulus for change in the world: “If the people’s church is to make progress and if liberation theology is to mature, we simply must adopt the rule of making every effort to incorporate elements specifically rooted in the situation of women into any and all theological articulations” (Ferro, 1981:33). Brazilian theologian Ivone Gebara captures the need for Liberation Theology to recognise the creative dynamism of women in Base Christian Communities across Latin America and to embark on a new theological route that reflects the mutuality and respect that exists between all peoples in these communities: “This is my hope: the day will come when all people, lifting their eyes, will see the earth shining with brotherhood and sisterhood, mutual appreciation, true complementarity” (Gebara, 1988:134). Tepedino and Ribeiro Brandão find evidence of a growing resolve among female theologians across Latin America to re-write the message of liberation from the perspective of women and their unremitting resolve to radically reverse the roles apportioned to them in society:

Women’s power for transformation achieves a certain synthesis in these theologians, in their particular way of demonstrating women’s resistance for survival, in their creativity in the discovery of a new place for women in society, and in their freedom, which, in the religious sense of the word, means living by and speaking of God. (Tepedino and Ribeiro Brandão, 1993:228)

Mich argues that Liberation Theology must engage with the pressing ecological questions of our time. Mich underlines how ecological thinkers have called for a re-evaluation of the anthropocentric bias implicit in the theology of liberation and the hierarchical ordering of creation that it promotes. Mich suggests that ecological theologians like Diego Irarrazaval “have challenged the assumption of both classical and liberation theology that humans

have primacy in the natural world” and that a more ‘cosmic-centred’ orientation in theology would recognise “the necessary link between concern for the environment and justice for exploited people” (Mich, 1998:271-272). Boff calls for a new ecological compass to steer civilisation forward founded on the premise that creation is “an organic and unique whole that is diverse and always inclusive” (Boff, 2007:63-64). Boff maintains that Liberation Theology has a defining role to play in providing the theological backdrop to this new movement in history so that the chasm that has existed between issues of political and environmental concern can be bridged:

We feel the urgency for a new ethos in civilization, a new ethos that enables us to give qualitative leaps in the direction of more cooperation in our living together, a new ethos that enables us to rejuvenate our veneration for the Mystery that underlies and that supports the process of evolution. (Boff, 2007:11)

Haight maintains that *Liberatis Nuntius* has been the source of wide discussion since its publication in 1984, with its nuances, ambiguities and generalisations that can be misleading and “thus depict the whole of liberation theology as under criticism against the stated intention of the document” (Haight, 1985:260). Haight suggests that there is common ground between liberation theologians and the concerns expressed in *Liberatis Nuntius* believing that “it endorses the values of commitment to the poor and reaction against the unjust social structures that exist in Latin America and which underlie all liberation theologies” (Haight, 1985:265). Indeed the document acclaims the “powerful and almost irresistible aspiration that people have for liberation” and underlines that this concern over the primacy given to Marxist social science in Liberation Theology “should not at all serve as an excuse for those who maintain an attitude of neutrality and indifference in the face of the tragic and pressing problems of human misery and injustice” (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in Haight, 1985:270). A close scrutiny of the document reveals an unequivocal affirmation of the contribution of theologians and laity alike across Latin America in breathing new life into the Church’s mission among those most alienated and more abandoned in society:

It is impossible to overlook the immense amount of selfless work done by Christians, pastors, priests, religious or laypersons, who, driven by a love for their brothers and sisters living in inhuman conditions, have endeavoured to bring help and comfort to countless people in the distress brought about by poverty. (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in Haight, 1985:277)

3.6 Concluding Remarks

Gutiérrez views this particular moment in the evolution of civilisation as “a favourable time, a kairos...a special period of God’s saving action, a time when a new route is being carved out for the following of Jesus” (Gutiérrez, 2005:20). Central to Gutiérrez’ ecclesiology is his insistence that this is a defining time in the movement of the Church through the ages, a time when communities of faith are responding to the voice of those most alienated and impoverished in society and translating the liberating power of the Christian story into the pressing challenges posed in each new age: “Rather than fixate on the past, we are called by them-each of us from his or her own cultural world-to make the present our own and forge the time which is coming” (Gutiérrez in Nickoloff, 1996:285). McAfee Brown maintains that the Church needs to continually re-invent itself in light of the suffering endured by the oppressed in each new age and discover in their persecution “a time fraught with high consequences, a moment for decisive action that must be seized before the opportunity is lost, a time when God visits people to offer them a unique opportunity... It is a moment of truth, a crisis” (McAfee Brown, 1990:166). Essentially, the theologians of liberation recognise in the present a unique opportunity for the Church to retrieve its true identity and become a credible representation of its source in history. Boff maintains that civilisation has reached an impasse in its movement through history and that the prevailing social ideologies deny rather than promote all that is good in humanity: “We are in need of a new paradigm for living together. Such a new paradigm will be based on better relations with the Earth, which will inaugurate a new social pact between peoples” (Boff, 2007:1-2).

The inference is clear; the Church can be instrumental in promoting an alternative way for humanity to live together and thereby ensure that the message it bears resonates deeply in the everyday realities of this time and place. Teixeira argues that Base Christian Communities provide a template for a more relevant and more meaningful Church, one which grows in correspondence with the vision and humanity of each new generation and one which can be adapted accordingly to changing and unmitigated circumstances: “They have not become fossilised or set in stone but are always ‘switched on’ and open to new horizons” (Teixeira, 2002:44). Teixeira recognises that the momentum for renewal that was being generated across Latin America over the last half century has been subdued in recent decades by the stiff resistance it has faced from within the Church. Teixeira

acclaims the spirit and the resilience of the people in these communities in the face of adversity and believes that it is they who will ultimately determine the future of this model of Church:

The base communities are still alive and stubbornly clinging to their dream of a church more attuned to following Jesus and bringing in the kingdom of God...*The ecclesiastical winds are not blowing particularly favourably at the moment*, (my italics) but the communities are used to surviving more difficult situations, and history has taught them the stratagems needed to keep the flame of their hope within their reach. (Teixeira, 2002:45)

This inquiry recognises the importance of consolidating the common ground that exists between the hierarchy and the people in their collective aspiration to create a new social order that more accurately reflects God's intentions for humanity. McGovern reflects on the importance of viewing the evolution of the Base Christian Community within the wider movement of the universal Church, believing that "to be ultimately successful, however, liberation work with the poor does require support from the institutional church (though church efforts alone will not decide the outcome)" (McGovern, 1989:232). McGovern urges those in leadership in the institutional Church to re-configure the existing ecclesial dynamic so that the voice of those once silenced can "override other concerns and prove a positive force for change" (McGovern, 1989:232). Romero captures the renewed sense of realism and honesty that comes from embracing the need most alienated in the world today: "What we developed as we walked with poor people- campesinos, the homeless, the urban poor... was real life- raw, painful, beautiful, sometimes ugly- but real" (Romero in Dennis, 1997:38-39). The enduring conviction that underscores the theology of liberation is that the Church needs to be propelled forward by the creative energy of its people as they anticipate ways in which the ideals of the Gospel can be embedded into the everyday realities that define their history. Ironically, *Liberatis Nuntius* captures the mindset that needs to exist if the Church is to give concrete expression to the liberating power of the message it seeks to proclaim:

More than ever, it is important that numerous Christians... become involved in the struggle for justice, freedom and human dignity because of their love for their disinherited, oppressed and persecuted brothers and sisters. (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in Haight, 1985:270)

Chapter 4: A Wider perspective on Base Christian Community

Chapter 4: A Wider Perspective on Base Christian Community

4.1 Introduction: Transcending the Particularity of Liberation Theology

Western progressivist theology provides a penetrating insight into the themes that are central to the theology of liberation and serves to further consolidate the credibility of the paradigm of Church emerging out of Latin America in recent decades. Chapter 3 establishes how Liberation Theology emerges out of a distinctive historical and political context and reflects the incorrigible resolve of the people there to overcome the abject social forces that they have to contend with. This chapter captures the universal resonance of the model of Base Christian Community and offers a uniquely Western perspective on the core convictions that animate these communities. McDonagh acclaims the efforts of Western theologians to advance the ecclesial vision that propels the Base Christian Community forward but cautions that all real theology has its historical and cultural particularity which makes it relatively inaccessible to the ‘outsider’: “For all his good intentions, informed sympathy and common intellectual heritage, the European remains decisively ‘outside’ this enterprise of liberation and the critical reflection in faith which makes it possible and necessary” (McDonagh, 1977:24). This chapter reveals how Western progressivist theology emerges from ‘within’ the peculiarities distinctive to Western society and signals a corresponding search in Western theological inquiry for a new ecclesiology that draws the Church closer to its source and closer to its people. As such, Western progressivist theology provides an additional layer of theological reflection to give legitimacy to the efforts of Christians to bring their own energies and vitality to bear on the Church’s mission in the world today.

Vatican 11 marks a new orientation in theological inquiry and challenges the Church to discover new ways of assimilating the tradition it has inherited into the pressing challenges of each new age. It is interesting to note that Schillebeeckx, Rahner and Congar contributed significantly to Vatican 11 and they, in turn, inspired Boff, Gutiérrez, Sobrino and other Latin American delegates who attended to return to their respective homelands with renewed vision and enthusiasm. Rahner believes that the Council marks a defining point in the history of the Church and signals a departure from a European centred ecclesiology towards a *world* Church that encompassed the needs and aspirations of all of

humanity. Rahner underlines how Vatican 11 reflected the views of Bishops from diocese in Asia, Africa and Latin America, which constituted about forty per cent of the Bishops at the Council, acting “not as an advisory body for the pope but rather with him and under him the final teaching and decision making body of the Church” (Rahner, 1979:718). In his critique of the Council in ‘Vatican 11: Of Happy Memory – and Hope’, Lash argues that in order for the Church to become a genuine universal church “it has to become a church which – while never ceasing to keep alive the memory that it grew from Jewish roots and flourished, for many centuries in European soil – will be genuinely at home in all the diverse cultures of the world” (Lash, 2003:27). The local church is recognised as a legitimate locus for the development of theology, no longer just an administrative ‘branch’ of the ‘real’ Church, but constitutive of the universal Church. Surlis maintains that Vatican II delineates a movement towards genuine universality, recognising the peculiarities unique to each culture within the wider network of the universal Church. Surlis detects a decisive move away from a centralised ecclesial body under the governance of Rome towards a Church that is more “localised or particularised, and this is not just spatially, but with reference to customs, practices and life-style of the local people” (Surlis, 1986:251).

Vatican 11 was a particularly fertile period of discernment in the Church that arrived at its conclusions through dialogue and consultation rather than through the promulgation of infallible pronouncements that would have defined conciliar reform in the past. O’Malley reveals how the style of the Council was based primarily on the art of persuasion and finding common ground, “to reconcile opposing views rather than vindicate one of them” (O’ Malley, 1987:27) and ultimately helped to set in motion the movement towards a more inclusive and democratic paradigm of Church. Albergio reveals how Pope John XXIII wanted the Council to signal an era of renewal that would enable the Church to “show itself to the world and teach humanity the evangelical message with the same power and urgency that marked the original Pentecost” (Albergio, 2006:605). Vatican II’s encyclical ‘The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World’, *Gaudium et Spes*, attributes great importance to the task of re-aligning the activity of the Church with the ongoing movement of the Spirit through history. *Gaudium et Spes* underlines how the Spirit is not removed from the world but embedded in the story of humanity as it “casts the reflected light of that divine life over all the earth, notably in the way it heals and elevates the dignity of the human person, in the way it consolidates society, and endows people’s daily activity with a deeper sense and meaning” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 1965:par.40). The

Council recognises that the people are the medium through which the Spirit is revealed to the world and interprets the Church's mission in light of the specific challenges and opportunities that are experienced by the faithful in each new historical and cultural epoch: "The Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 1965:par.4). Richard argues that the Council presents the Church not as "standing *outside* the world" but as "listening to the world from *within* the world" (Richard, 2003:95). Lane too detects a significant shift in Vatican II from seeing the Church above and beyond the world to seeing the world as the locus for Church activity:

Having affirmed these traditional aspects of the Church's mission the Council then goes on to say that this religious aspect of the Church requires at the same time a practical commitment to the renewal of the temporal sphere. This implies that the Church must be also committed to the creation of a better world, to the promotion of justice, to the development of peoples, and to the defence of human rights. (Lane, 1984:115)

The clear message reverberating from the Council is that the Church needs to centre itself in the midst of its people if it is to release the liberating power of the message it proclaims into the vicissitudes of each new time and place. The opening words of *Gaudium et Spes* stresses the importance of solidarity with the poor in a way which had not been explicitly stated before in conciliar document insisting that "the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted, are the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 1965:par.1). Vatican II is viewed by some as a starting point in the process of re-claiming a space for the people at the heart of a new dynamic of Church. Tissa Balasuriya, a Sri Lankan theologian of liberation, believes that the Council interprets the struggles of humanity within the narrowed sphere of the existing ecclesial framework with little evidence of "deep dialogue with other religions, cultures, and ideologies as offering alternative analyses and worldviews to the white, Western, capitalist, male mind-set that still dominated Catholicism" (Balasuriya, 1984:148). Yet the enduring legacy of the Council is the unequivocal call to the universal Church not to retreat from the world but to engage with its people and work towards a new dawn of liberation and justice. Metz argues that the alternative would leave the Church removed from the world and from the

overwhelming realities of pain and suffering that so many have to endure and thereby undermine the relevance and significance of its mission in the world today:

Nothing incriminates our one church more than the attempt to preserve its political innocence by withholding its vote in the face of the suffering and conflicts of this world. (Metz, 1978:138)

Vatican II provided the stimulus for a new departure in theological discourse the world over and the themes developed in this chapter reflect the natural reciprocity that exists between strands of Western theological reflection and the theology of liberation. The theologians who provide the inspiration for this chapter, listed in Section 1.5 (p.12), follow diverse paths along the road to their enlightenment. Some like Roger Haight and John Fuellenbach are committed to articulating a new vision of Church that reflects their first hand experience of the indomitable courage and dignity of people in places of great destitution and hardship around the world. Haight has lectured extensively in Manilla, Lima and Nairobi and has discovered in the infectious kindness generated in communities of the poor a palpable sense of God's involvement in the history of humanity. Fuellenbach also spent 7 years in the Philippines and his time lecturing there drew him closer to the unique spirit of the poor and their capacity to reveal what is of enduring worth in life. Others like Edward Schillebeeckx, Karl Rahner, Bernard Cooke, Walter Brueggemann, Thomas O' Meara, Yves Congar, Bernard Lonergan, Thomas Groome, Avery Dulles, Johann Baptist Metz and Jürgen Moltmann are committed to ensuring that the challenges that Vatican II presents to the Church are not confined to a bygone era but stimulate a new departure in theological inquiry that breathes life into the Church around the world today. Jean Vanier offers a unique theological perspective into the compelling spiritual strength of those voiceless and alienated on the fringes of Western society and reflects what he has discovered from living among people with physical and intellectual disabilities in the L'Arche Communities that he has founded. These theologians share an unwavering belief that the future of the Church must rest decisively in the hands of its people if the liberating power of the message it seeks to proclaim is to reverberate through history.

This chapter is structured in accordance with the method of thematic analysis outlined in Section 2.4.4 (pp.30-32) and centres on 3 recurring themes that resonate throughout Western progressivist theological inquiry. The first, 'Towards a New Spirituality – Reconciling God with the World', reflects the overriding conviction in Western

progressivist theology that God is not detached from the world and indifferent to human suffering but is an integral part of the story of humanity. Western progressivist theologians insist that spirituality is no longer the exclusive remit of mystics but something that all of humanity can share in. This strand of theology anchors theological reflection on the significance of the everyday realities that define human existence to draw humanity into the vast expanse of mystery. The second, 'Re-aligning the Church with the Activity of the Spirit', reflects the repeated call in Western progressivist theology for a radical reversal in how the Church has traditionally operated in the world so that the people, in collaboration with their leaders, begin to determine a new path for the universal Church to follow. Western progressive ecclesiology has evolved out of a climate of debate and dialogue and acclaims the potential of people on the periphery of the traditional ecclesial norms to inject fresh impetus into the life of the Church. The third, 'Interpreting the Gospel in Light of the Oppressive Realities of Our Time', emerges out of the concerted efforts of Western progressivist theologians to unravel the layers of ecclesial tradition and capture what lies at the essence of the Church's mission in the world. The primary concern of these theologians is to translate the significance of the Christian story in a way that responds to the challenges posed in each new historical epoch so that the richness of the Christian message continues to reverberate through history. The structure to this chapter corresponds with the summary of chapter contents outlined in Chapter 1, pp.12-13.

Theme 1 (Section 4.2, pp.155-168) examines how Western progressivist theology bridges the divide between the realm of the spiritual and the world of everyday experience and puts a spotlight on God's presence in the immediacy of history. This theme underlines how the human search for spiritual enlightenment does not elevate theological inquiry above the less palatable aspects of human existence but takes cognisance of the prevalence of suffering in the world. The concluding phase of this theme highlights the importance Western progressivist theology attributes to the role humanity can play in rolling out salvation in history so that God's intentions for civilisation can become a reality to be experienced in the present rather than merely a future aspiration. The primary aim of this theme is to explore how Western theological inquiry uncovers the power of the ordinary, everyday realities to draw humanity deeper into the mystery of God's grace as it is revealed in history.

Theme 2 (Section 4.3, pp.168-183) explores how Western progressivist theology articulates the need for a radical reversal in how the Church has traditionally operated in the world so that the people are encouraged to release their creative energy into the life of their faith community. This theme underlines how leadership in the Church is no longer viewed as the exclusive privilege of those at the higher echelons of the current system but shared among the people in accordance with the ministries that they exercise within their faith community. The aim of this theme is to illustrate how Western theological inquiry promotes an emerging dynamic in Christian ministry that draws the people in from the periphery of the Church and encourages them to play a defining role in channelling the presence of the Spirit in the world today.

Theme 3 (Section 4.4, pp.183-196) explores how Western theology underlines the need for the Church to re-discover its prophetic voice and promote an alternative to the prevailing ideologies that exist in Western society. The aim of this theme is to illustrate how Western theologians re-position the kingdom at the heart of theology and acclaim the emergence of communities of faith that live in accordance with the ideals and the values of the Gospel. The theme reveals how Christian praxis is the cornerstone of these communities and underlines how this new dynamic in Christian witness translates the Gospel into the immediacy of history in meaningful ways. The overriding interest throughout this chapter is to establish the parallel that exists between Western theological inquiry and the theology of liberation and to provide a wider theological framework to give credence to the paradigm of Base Christian Community within and beyond the place of its genesis.

4.2 Theme 1: Towards a New Spirituality – Reconciling God with the World

Western progressivist theology redresses the traditional tendency to place God beyond history into some impenetrable sphere removed from the world of human interaction. Section 4.2.1 (pp.156-160) underlines how this strand of theological inquiry establishes a powerful symmetry between God's recurring presence in history and the reciprocal human ability to access the deeper realm of mystery concealed within their experience. Section 4.2.2 (pp.160-163) explores how Western progressivist theology assimilates the reality of suffering into its inquiry and proposes a new understanding of spirituality that takes cognisance of this reality. Section 4.2.3 (pp.163-168) examines a Western theological

perspective on how solidarity with the poor draws humanity deeper into the movement of God's grace in history and elicits reserves of compassion and love in the individual that might otherwise remain unharnessed. This section highlights how each person can channel God's grace in the world and contribute to the evolving story of salvation. Central to Western progressivist theology is the conviction that God's capacity to determine the course of civilisation is very much predicated by the willingness of humanity to participate with God in releasing the potency of love into the world in a way that transforms the lives of those exposed to great suffering and oppression. Vanier underlines the transforming impact of love when it takes hold in the life of each person and the enduring resonance of quiet, unheralded acts of kindness:

We are simply a tiny sign, among thousands of others, that love is possible... that there is hope, because we believe that the Father loves us and sends his Spirit to transform our hearts and lead us from egoism to love, so that we can live everyday life as brothers and sisters. (Vanier, 1979:231)

4.2.1 Engaging in the Process of Discerning God's Presence in the World

Rahner believes that the transcendent is not some esoteric realm removed from the vicissitudes of history but is an intrinsic component in the temporal, finite realities that define human existence. Rahner's theology alternates between an affirmation of a deep, mystical presence woven through the strands of everyday experience and a recognition of the corresponding human impulse to become susceptible to the movement of this presence in their lives. This dialectic, he believes, opens the gateway for humanity to understand God more fully and "allows us to experience what is meant by God as the revealing and fulfilling ground of that expanse of the Spirit and its unlimited movement" (Rahner, 1979:15). For him, individuals must thrust their reflective faculties beyond the threshold of reason and discover in moments of deep insight the prevalence of the eternal among the transient realities of our existence:

Every object of our conscious mind which we encounter in our social world and environment, as it announces itself as it were of itself, is merely a stage, a constantly new starting-point in this movement which continues into the everlasting and unnamed 'before-us'. Whatever is given in our everyday and scientific consciousness is only a minute isle... in a boundless ocean of nameless mystery. (Rahner, 1979:13)

Loneragan maintains that the vast expanse of the infinite is not beyond the horizon of humanity but is contained within the realm of human encounter without ever being disclosed in its entirety: “We move beyond imagination and guess-work, idea and hypothesis... Now transcendence takes on a new meaning. Not only does it go beyond the subject but also it seeks what is independent of the subject” (Loneragan, 1972:104). Lonergan insists that a reflective response to the questions that arise in the everyday world of human interaction can draw the individual deeper into the realm of mystery and closer to the quintessential truths that give meaning to life:

Because we ask questions and answer them and live by the answers, we can effect in our living a real self-transcendence... willing what is truly good and doing it, of collaboration and true love, of swinging completely out of the habitat of an animal and of becoming a genuine person in a human society. (Loneragan, 1972:104)

Rahner is convinced that evidence of this indissoluble connection between the eternal and the temporal would remain hidden and obscure were it not for the human capacity to discern meaning and significance from the vagaries of experience. In essence, the gift is matched by a reciprocal capability in the recipient to penetrate through the layers of life and uncover that “nameless, illimitable eternity” that lies at its core (Rahner, 1979:13). Haight echoes this view and argues that God “who is totally other than the world, cannot be experienced apart from the world but only through the world and in relation to the world” (Haight, 1985:247). Rahner reveals that access to the transcendental realm to existence is not the exclusive privilege of mystics and spiritual leaders but is available to all: “There is the mysticism of everyday life, the discovery of God in all things; there is the sober intoxication of the Spirit... Let us seek the specific experiences in which something like that happens to us” (Rahner, 1979:22). Rahner argues that unless individuals become attentive to this subliminal realm to their existence and begin to “dig it out from under the rubbish of everyday experience” their capacity to align their lives with the mystical underlayer to experience will remain unrealised (Rahner, 1979:21). Tracy, in contrast, contends that religious truths are not arrived at as a consequence of a human search for meaning, but, rather, are disclosed to humanity as a gift from God. Tracy views the path to spiritual enlightenment as “an event, a happening manifested to my experience, neither determined by nor produced by my subjectivity” thereby assimilated into the consciousness of each human being by “letting be seen of what is, as it shows itself to

experience” (Tracy, 1981:198). Schillebeeckx argues that real spiritual discernment is made possible by the “gratuitousness” of God, and, as such, is reached not through critical reasoning but through a deeper susceptibility to the movement of God’s presence in the intricacies of history:

That is why God is by nature purely gratuitous. And it is why it is impossible to prove the existence of God with rational arguments as such. All that we can say is that in our human life, both individual and communal, there are points, places, in which talk of God becomes intelligible. But the existence of God for us is purely gratuitous. And gratuitousness cannot be proved. It’s enough. (Schillebeeckx, 1994:55)

MacGabhann remarks how the human capacity to delve into the realm of mystery that underpins our everyday interactions is a “best kept secret” by the Church (MacGabhann, 2008:203). For him, people are “wired for mystical experience” (MacGabhann, 2008:213), which involves “the act of letting myself go into the mystery past all grasp” (MacGabhann, 2008:215). MacGabhann views the institutional Church as something that stifles rather than encourages this process and “because they cannot control experience, they view an individual’s experience of God as a threat to their authority” (MacGabhann, 2008:124). A close scrutiny of recent statements by Pope Francis, however, reveals a significant shift in emphasis under his papacy and a willingness to recognise that while this world can never fully encapsulate the totality of God it is nevertheless the medium through which God becomes accessible to humanity. Pope Francis distinguishes between scientific truths that are visibly verifiable and more profound truths that are only ascertained through a process of deep spiritual discernment:

Finding God in all things is not an ‘empirical eureka’. When we desire to encounter God, we would like to verify him immediately by an empirical method... A contemplative attitude is necessary: it is the feeling that you are moving along the good path of understanding... profound peace, spiritual consolation, love of God and love of all things in God – this is the sign that you are on this right path. (Pope Francis, 2013:10)

Vanier argues that particular strands of reality transport us more deeply into the realm of mystery and impel us closer to God. For him, the world of the poor provides an artery for God to percolate into history in a special way: “There is a mystery in the heart of the poor... Hidden in their radical poverty, in their obvious wounds, is the mystery of the presence of God” (Vanier, 1979:43). Vanier acclaims the unique prophetic charism of the

poor that strips humanity of the vestiges of secularism and remind us of what is of perennial value: “The poor are always prophetic. As true prophets always point out, they reveal God’s design” (Vanier, 1979:138). Wresinski too contends that God’s presence resonates deeply in the world of the poor: “God is not only the inspirer but also the reality of our principles. God is primary among the poorest. God is the poorest” (Wresinski, 2002:164). Vanier insists that God speaks to humanity through the lives of those most exposed to great suffering and hardship in life and believes that closeness to the poor draws humanity deeper into the mysterious presence of God’s love in the world: “That is why we should take time to listen to them. And that means staying near them, because they speak quietly and infrequently” (Vanier, 1979:138). Vanier believes that the poor provide a conduit for God to enter history, and, through their insecurities as well as their boundless capacity for love they draw those privileged to walk alongside them into the mystery of God’s love for humanity:

Yet in our world the poor and the weak are always insecure, at the mercy of human and political powers, at the mercy even of their own brokenness and inner violence... Yes, insecurity and weakness are like a door through which passes the strength of God. (Vanier, 1988:104)

Rahner argues that times of great uncertainty and despair bridge the chasm between human consciousness and the realm of the divine and draw us deeper into the all embracing world of mystery. For Rahner, all human beings are subject to forces that leave us bereft of hope and cognisant of our own poverty in the face of the unknown. Rahner believes that times of great tumult heighten our efforts to assign meaning to life and extend our critical faculties into new, uncharted territories. It is during times when “the graspable contours of our everyday realities break and dissolve... when lights which illuminate the tiny islands of our everyday life go out” that humanity is impelled to engage with the inescapable possibility that “the night surrounding us is the absurd void of death engulfing us, or the blessed holy night which is already illumined from within and gives promise to everlasting day” (Rahner, 1979:18). Vanier believes that these moments provide the stimulus for human beings to project beyond the immediacy of their experiences and discover truths about themselves that are common to all of humanity: “Often we have to come to the edge of the precipice before we reach the moment of truth and recognise our own poverty and need of each other, and cry to God for help” (Vanier, 1979:76-77). Rahner argues that this human search for meaning and purpose in the midst of the uncertainties and confusions of

life will eventually lead each person who engages in this search to recognise God's unwavering involvement in the evolving story of their lives:

The boundless transcendental movement of the human spirit to God is so radical that this movement does not merely take God as an asymptotic goal that is always at an infinite distance, but as that which itself directly comprises the attainable goal of that movement. (Rahner, 1979:15)

4.2.2 Responding to the Less Palatable Aspects of Human Existence

Haight believes that Christian spirituality challenges us to respond to the less palatable aspects of our human condition and embrace rather than deny the reality of suffering in each new age. Haight recognises that the spectre of pain and suffering in the world casts a shadow over humanity's efforts to attribute meaning and significance to life: "Christian spirituality is not exempt from the doubt and crisis of meaning that history presents to everyone. The underside of history, its measureless amount of suffering and life lived in inhuman conditions, make it appear chaotic and meaningless" (Haight, 1985:247). Haight recognises that if this world is the only channel through which humanity navigates into the realm of the spiritual, a denial of one fundamental aspect of this reality would render this search obsolete. For Haight, a spiritual vision that ignores the reality of suffering lacks credibility and substance and only widens the gulf between the world of faith and the immediate world of the believer. Haight believes that the prevalence of suffering and oppression in the world deepens our confusion and uncertainty in our search for meaning:

Stated very broadly it consists in the crisis of the meaning of historical existence as such which is raised by the degree and the sheer amount of human poverty and suffering that history displays... Individuals or groups cannot ultimately claim that their lives have meaning while masses of others live out a seemingly senseless human existence. (Haight, 1985:121)

O' Sullivan echoes this view believing that suffering is an inescapable reality of life and any effort to ascribe significance to our existence must take cognisance of the oppressive realities that so many humans have to contend with. O Sullivan is critical of elements of theology that elevate the process of spiritual inquiry above the "massive, and for so long, mute suffering of most of the human race" and thereby exclude "the poor, their presence, their suffering, and more latterly their eruption in our midst" from their deliberations (O' Sullivan, 1989:10). Moltmann too criticises views of history that crystallise the meaning of

life above, beyond, or apart from history. Within this narrative of God, historical events are provisional as “they intimate and point forward to something which does not yet exist in its fullness in themselves” (Moltmann, 1967:108). Moltmann argues the spiritual search for enlightenment should not circumvent the reality of suffering in the world but must discover in the struggles and the persecution of the oppressed the prism through which we come to recognise God’s presence in the world more clearly: “He suffers with them, he suffers because of them, he suffers for them. His suffering is his messianic secret” (Moltmann, 1979:97-98).

Metz argues that an authentic spirituality evolves out of the memory of suffering inflicted on humanity in the past and reflects a genuine attempt to penetrate beyond the oppressive forces that hinder humanity’s evolution through history: “The history of suffering and the social history of oppression are certainly not simply identical in this memory of suffering, but neither can they be separated in the concrete” (Metz, 2007:110). Metz believes that the reality of suffering has left an indelible mark on humanity’s progress through civilisation. Auschwitz symbolises, for Metz, modernity’s barbarity not only in that Auschwitz could occur but that the horror of its occurrence could be so easily forgotten: “Has not a massive forgetfulness long since taken over? The dead of Auschwitz should have brought upon us a total transformation; nothing should have been allowed to remain as it was, neither among our people nor in our churches” (Metz, 1980:101). Metz is critical of a reliance on a form of logic that allows humanity to forget past acts for the sake of future conquests and thereby denigrate the reality of the persecution that many in the world continue to endure:

The essential dynamics of history consist of the memory of suffering as a negative consciousness of future freedom and as a stimulus to overcome suffering within the framework of that freedom. The history of freedom is therefore – subject to the assumed alienation of man and nature – only possible as a history of suffering. (Metz, 1980:108)

Haight sheds light on the difficulty of reconciling the perennial reality of suffering in the history of humanity with an understanding of God as the benevolent source of life. In his book *Jesus- Symbol of God* (1999), Haight heightens the importance of recognising the suffering of people in the immediacy of this moment in history and asks “how can this relatively tiny human history be reckoned as significant and meaningful when it is in turn filled with so much suffering for so many people?” (Haight, 1999:374). Haight underlines how the personal experience of suffering intensifies the human search for meaning and

draws humanity deeper into the unavoidable reality of mystery. Haight contends that it is only through the process of grappling with those very aspects of history which confound our search for meaning that we grow in our understanding of God:

Surely a personal God could not cause by creation the huge amounts of poverty and suffering that are witnessed today. And even if God is not the cause of this situation, if a great deal of this suffering is due really to human beings preying on others, what relevance, what utility does God have in and for this actual situation? (Haight, 1985:36)

Haight contends that the search for enlightenment must take place against the backdrop of overwhelming evidence against the presuppositions of faith. Haight's appraisal of the link between Christian spirituality and suffering hinges on one central paradox; the only gateway to truth lies in first passing through all that seems to obscure God from the world. It follows that any authentic spirituality should anchor us in history rather than elevate us above it, strengthening our ties with our fellow human beings and deepening our alliance with God in the process: "All spirituality, and especially Christian spirituality... should not isolate or separate human beings from the world and other human beings but rather bind them to a common human existence in solidarity with others in the world" (Haight, 1985:240). Wresinski captures this succinctly:

People must consequently pursue their encounter with the other person to the end, and make the other part of their lives even the poorest... To love the other as ourselves, our love must embrace all that this entails, including deprivation comparable even to that of the most destitute person. (Wresinski, 2002:164)

Haight insists that God's all-pervading presence in the world is very much predicated by the way human beings exercise their freedom: "God may be close in nature, but God has left us "on our own" so to speak in history... at times God appears pointedly absent and human responsibility appears charged to make God's presence felt" (Haight, 1985:192). Metz captures the dialectic between God's involvement in the history of humanity and the role of human freedom in creating the conditions for humanity to participate with God in the process of drawing civilisation to its intended goal. For Metz, God is always present through the freedom of historical consciousness: "God is not the source concurring with human freedom but the freedom that allows human freedom to be in the concrete. His freedom holds sway as the liberating basis of freedom's subjectivity" (Metz, 1969:42). Haight realises that our spiritual journey should lead us down a path where we begin to

decipher the truths that give meaning to life through our concerted efforts to reach out and embrace the burdens of others:

... when one actually works to build just human relationships, when one struggles to assist in the emancipation of the freedom of some human beings and actually succeeds in some small measure, there one has real grounds, however tenuous, for asserting not only a meaning but possibly the meaning of history. (Haight, 1985:135)

4.2.3 God's Grace and the Unfolding of Salvation in History

Haight believes that the theology that has emanated from Latin America provides a framework that places the human experience of suffering and inequality in the world firmly in the context of the movement of history towards the ideal that God aspires for humanity. Haight maintains that the understanding of salvation promoted in the theology of liberation hinges on the essential continuum between the future and the present; between the affirmation of an absolute future beyond the constraints of this world and the significance apportioned to the value of each new age in the evolving story of humanity. Haight contends that the momentum for future salvation is initiated at this moment in history and that the promise of future reward for humanity must be “bent back so as to become operative and effective within history” (Haight, 1985:85). Haight is in no doubt that the wretched social conditions endured by the world's poor are a perennial reminder that the current course of history is incomplete. Echoing his theological counterparts in Latin America, Haight insists that our understanding of salvation must heighten the importance of what each new historical epoch reveals without losing sight of the goal towards which history is moving: “While the ultimate meaning of salvation as final and definitive beyond history is not lost sight of... salvation in Christ affects human existence and life here and now in this world” (Haight, 1985:22). O' Sullivan questions whether the Western theological mindset is cognisant of “the unique hermeneutic privilege of the poor” and the possibilities that their unique testimony to the Gospel present to the Church's mission in the world (O' Sullivan, 1989:7). O' Sullivan argues that Western theological inquiry needs to go one step further and recognise that the poor themselves are contributing to the salvation of the Church. This necessitates an acceptance that “love takes the privileged and historical form of good news to the poor... known and accepted as such from within the praxis of liberation of the poor” (O' Sullivan, 1989:8).

Western progressivist theology accentuates the importance of promoting a dynamic in each new age that moves civilisation closer to the ideal that God aspires for humanity. Metz interprets salvation not as an escape from history but as an engagement in history; a dynamic that impels us to take cognisance of the plight of people too easily ignored or forgotten in contemporary society: “Salvation history is the world’s history in which space is made for defeated and repressed hopes and suffering to have meaning. Salvation history is that history of the world in which meaning is promised to the vanquished and forgotten possibilities of human existence” (Metz, 2007:110). At ‘The World Synod of Bishops’ in 1977, Pope Paul VI celebrated the efforts of those working to promote freedom and justice in communities around the world, something that he believed would leave an indelible mark on humankind. In what is a hugely significant departure in Church teaching, Pope Paul VI contends that the transformative action of Christians throughout the world in their pursuit of justice contributes to the unfolding of salvation in history and ensures that the legacy of the Christian story lives on:

There is no doubt that everything which touches human promotion, that is the work for justice, development and peace in all parts of the world ought also to be an integral part of the message... Do not separate human liberation and salvation in Jesus without however identifying them. (World Synod of Bishops, 1971:par.36)

Haight underlines how God works through humanity to create the conditions that make salvation possible, and, by engaging in the task of alleviating injustice and persecution in the world, humanity effectively contributes to the rolling out of salvation in history. For Haight, the corollary of this is clear and its significance cannot be understated; we do not discover meaning by becoming subsumed in a mysterious realm beyond the parameters of this world but create meaning in and through the everyday occurrences that define our lives: “But the Christian is one who is convinced that he or she is called to create or make meaning within history by the use of his or her own freedom” (Haight, 1985:247). Haight insists that the goal towards which civilisation is continuously moving is not beyond the domain of this world but is intrinsically bound to the realities that shape our human existence:

Salvation is not just a goal but also a process, or a possible process, within history itself. There cannot be complete discontinuity between history and its goal, or else the process of history and living human life in it would be intrinsically valueless. (Haight, 1985:39)

Haight believes that the gift of God's grace to humanity provides the necessary stimulus for the rolling out of salvation in history. Haight contends that this essential dynamism between the individual and God, once actualised, mobilises the release of love into the peculiarities of each new time and place. Haight's theology is rooted in the conviction that the source of love percolates through the pores of humanity into the wider sphere of civilisation to become a potent force in history: "The whole of history, then, is a dialogue in which God addresses persons in love and people respond to this offer of God's self-donation as it is manifested in their lives and experience" (Haight, 1979:150-151). Haight suggests that this gift is both personal to each individual yet universally available to all:

All of human existence is created into the sphere or order of God's grace, God being present to human beings personally through God's Spirit... Grace is universally available; all human beings and human nature itself exist within the sphere of God's Spirit, that is, God's being present to them and within them in a personal way. (Haight, 1985:151)

Metz underlines how the inescapable reality of suffering in the world provides a conduit to truth and enlightenment, and, our individual and collective memory of this reality "inspires us to a new form of solidarity, of responsibility for the most distant stranger, since the history of suffering unites all men and women like a second nature" (Metz, 2007:102). Wresinski believes that God's grace is palpable in the everyday realities of human existence and can potentially seep through to the inner caverns of our being and re-align our lives with the profound human impulse to love: "Grace is "more" knowing that we are not just a distant reflection of God, but that the Lord is permanently present and living in us" (Wresinski, 2002:33). Wresinski believes that God's grace becomes accessible to humanity through the medium of the poor and is cognisant of the challenge this presents to the activity of the Church in the world today:

The poorest are the artery through which blood must flow to sustain the whole body. If the artery is blocked, the whole body dies. For the Church, the poor are the artery, and to clear that artery is a matter of life or death. If grace passes through the poorest, the whole body is nourished. (Wresinski, 2002:26)

Haight believes that the hallmark of God's involvement in the evolving story of humanity is the gift of grace to each individual. In seeing the world as a vast kaleidoscope of God's all embracing presence in history, Haight narrows the lens to explore the impact of this presence on the life of each human being: "God's Spirit is God as personally self-giving

and communicating, God as personally present to and dynamic and active within human subjects” (Haight, 1985:151). Haight offers a penetrating insight into how gift of God’s grace can have a transforming impact on the life of the individual. For him, God’s grace is not superimposed from beyond the confines of this world but is carefully and intrinsically woven through the strands of habitual human interaction in this world: “Moreover, the existential of grace is not laid on top of the order of creation or nature; it is embedded in it as its deepest intention, dynamism and goal” (Haight, 1985:152). Lonergan captures this succinctly: “In itself and in its fruits, the gift of God’s love is conscious” (Lonergan in Lonergan, Croken and Doran ed., 2004:169). Lonergan maintains that God’s recurring presence in history finds its deepest resonance in the human heart and filters out from within each person to impact on the course of civilisation. Lonergan insists that God’s love reveals itself in the interiority of the human being and a growing receptivity to the mystery of this love can lead the individual to “the acknowledgement of a transcendent reality immanent in human hearts, supreme in beauty, intelligence, truth” (Lonergan in Lonergan, Croken and Doran ed., 2004:43). Lonergan argues that the gift of God’s grace effectively transports humanity to a new level of consciousness and draws each person beyond the boundaries of reason into the vast expanse of infinite love:

Such fulfilment is not the product of our knowledge and choice. It is God’s free gift. So far from resulting from our knowing and choosing, it dismantles and abolishes the horizon in which our knowing and choosing went on, and it constructs a new horizon in which the love of God transvalues our values and the eyes of that love transform our knowing. (Lonergan, in Lonergan, Croken and Doran ed., 2004:326)

Haight argues that the need for God’s grace arises out of our inability to subdue our natural propensity to sin. Left to our own devices, human beings are fundamentally weak and inextricably bound to the inclination to place considerations of self over a concern for others: “Of ourselves and by ourselves we cannot leave ourselves and surrender in altruistic love to another; the weight of our free spirit, its existential drive, is to subordinate all else to ourselves” (Haight, 1985:148). Haight argues that this compelling need to satisfy our own self interests effectively stifles deeper, more meaningful impulses within us. Haight contends that God’s grace, once experienced, can be the source of great renewal for the individual. Critically, Haight contends that the movement of grace is conditional on a reciprocal gesture on the part of humanity. Haight is convinced that when we create opportunities in life that allow us to embrace the suffering of others, we activate

the God's grace within us and complete the transition from egoism to love. At this moment, Haight insists, the dynamic between the individual and God is sealed:

Thus when one transcends oneself in genuine love, when one goes out of the self in love and service of the other that is really altruistic, it is accompanied by the experience, if not the confession, that the force for this love is not I but the Spirit or grace of God within me. (Haight, 1985:153)

Vanier is in no doubt that interaction with the poor awakens humanity to the potency of God's love and creates an opening for humanity to decipher a deeper pattern to the ostensible realities that define our existence: "They have led me gently into the depths of my own heart filled, as it is, with light and darkness... They have begun to reveal to me with greater clarity God's unfolding plan for humanity" (Vanier, 1988:16). Vanier maintains that God's love for the world echoes resoundingly in the world of those who suffer and underlines how closeness to those most alienated and impoverished in the world elicits new potentialities in each individual and draws out hidden reserves of solidarity and love:

It may be a meeting with a poor person, whose call awakens a response in us; we discover that there is a living spring hidden deep within us... the first experience stays hidden in the heart's memory. We know from then on that our deepest life is light and love. (Vanier, 1979:47)

Lonergan recognises that grace cannot be contained within the individual but must overflow into the world if it is to become an effective and powerful current in history. It is then, he suggests, that grace becomes the conduit through which God's salvation is made readily available to all of humanity: "That grace would be the grace sufficient for salvation that God offers all men, that underpins what is good in all the religions of mankind, that explains how those that never heard the gospel can be saved" (Lonergan in Lonergan, Croken and Doran ed., 2004:83). Haight underlines the role each human being can play in mobilising the movement of grace in the world. Ultimately, grace reverberates outwards from within each individual to exert a transforming influence in the world, and, in the process, draw civilisation closer to its salvation:

Grace is not a private possession and does not withdraw the Christian from the world. The exact opposite is the case. God's election and the influence of the Spirit transform the person and the community and

flows outward through them into society transforming it. (Haight, 1985:159-160)

Haight believes that this interplay between the inner world of the spirit and the outer expression of the spirit is central to the movement of grace in the world: “God works in the human personality and in history through the agency of human beings” and this grace “cannot be a purely personal phenomenon in any individualistic sense precisely because it liberates a person by effecting spontaneous openness to the neighbour” (Haight, 1979:178). Rahner re-iterates this point in asserting that “in historical deeds and processes a human being’s relationship to God manifests itself and becomes historically perceptible” (Rahner, 1992:286). Schillebeeckx clarifies the importance of this essential dialectic between humanity and God believing that both ultimately derive their significance and their happiness from the activity of the other:

God shall be a God of human beings and strengthen his reign of freedom, of justice, of love and mercy among human beings. This is a divine and royal government above all human relationships, a policy and an action in which both God and human beings can realize themselves and finally achieve happiness – each confirming the other so that both are happy. It seems to me a peculiarity of Christianity that both God and human beings are happy together. (Schillebeeckx, 1994:104)

4.3 Re-aligning the Church with the Activity of the Spirit

Western progressivist theology promotes an era of renewal in the Church and acclaims the innovative ways in which the faithful are beginning to put their own imprint on Christian ministry and release a new energy into the life of the Church. This theme reveals how people previously silenced are now re-claiming their rightful place at the heart of the Church’s mission in the world. Section 4.3.1 (pp.169-176) examines how Western theology establishes the importance of re-inventing the existing model of Church and recognising the possibilities that exist beyond the boundaries of the prevailing structures. Section 4.3.2 (pp.176-183) explores how Western theologians articulate their own distinctive vision of Church that testifies to the creative dynamism of the faithful in Christian communities around the world and broadens the scope of Christian ministry to encompass the myriad of ways in which these communities are bringing the Gospel to life in their surroundings. Haight recognises the challenge that these communities present to the Church today:

We are genuinely moving into dramatically new frontiers in our common humanity and as a church. Unless the church in its ministers and ministries can find the freedom which is engendered by historical consciousness to dramatically reinterpret its message, it will not preserve that message but surely compromise and even contradict it by default. What is required then is a conscious release from traditionalism in order to keep the tradition alive and meaningful. (Haight, 2001:xii)

4.3.1 Moving Beyond the Limitations of the Prevailing Dynamic of Church

Western theological inquiry underlines the need for the Church to grow and develop in correspondence with its people if it is to find an authentic presence in each new historical epoch. Dulles recognises that the existing hierarchical paradigm of Church needs to be replaced by something more dynamic and participatory: “The church is understood in terms of dogmas, laws, and hierarchical agencies which impose heavy demands of conformity. To be a good Catholic... is simply to adhere to the beliefs and practices demanded by the office-holders” (Dulles, 1983:3). Dulles contends that the Church remains entrenched in a system that stifles rather than liberates its members, preferring to consolidate and protect its structures rather than open these structures up to the creative energy of its people: “The top officers are regarded as servants of the institution, bound by a rigid party line, and therefore inattentive to the impulses of the Holy Spirit and unresponsive to the legitimate religious concerns of the faithful” (Dulles, 1983:3). In the process, Dulles suggests, the Church has become alienated from its own people: “At the risk of caricature, one may say that many think of the Church as a huge, impersonal machine set over and against its own members” (Dulles, 1983:3). Rahner believes that the hierarchical Church has become progressively more insulated from the world through the ages to the point that it now preserves the established order with “the kind of unity that belongs to a faction closed in upon itself” (Rahner, 1992:244). Rahner is convinced that the Church needs to break free from the rigidity of a centralised model of governance and begin to embrace the diverse array of talent and energy at its disposal outside the boundaries of the prevailing structures:

It is a situation dominated by a spirit which has been rather too hasty and too uncompromising in taking the dogmatic definition of the primacy of the pope in the church as the bond of unity and the guarantee of truth, this attitude objectifying itself in a not inconsiderable degree of centralization of government in an ecclesiastical bureaucracy at Rome. (Rahner, 1992:244)

A recurring theme in Western progressivist theology is that under the institutional mindset an allegiance to the faith tradition inherited from the past hinders the leadership of the Church from discovering new possibilities in the present. Dulles argues that the leaders themselves are so submerged in perpetuating the prevailing system that they too become bound to the oppressive constraints of the existing structures: “The hierarchy themselves, according to this view are prisoners of the system they impose on others” (Dulles, 1983:3). Rowthorn reinforces this view succinctly: “It took hundreds of years for the Church to become clericalized, and the present generation of clergy cannot be blamed for the ills of the institution they inherited... many clergy feel there is much wrong with the institutional Church, but they are at a loss to know what to do about it” (Rowthorn, 1986:24). Schillebeeckx contends that the prevailing hierarchical model of Church discourages any form of critical inquiry or participation on the part of those on the lower tiers of the pyramid, and, as such, is fundamentally biased against the majority of its people: “Moreover, this hierarchy focused on the top of the church devalued the laity at the base of the pyramid, so that they became merely the object of priestly pastoral concern” (Schillebeeckx, 1985:158). Schillebeeckx believes that the current dynamic of Church confers on those in positions of leadership a “pattern of life and unity with God which the ordinary believer could experience only indirectly and in an incomplete way” (Schillebeeckx, 1985:158). Fuellenbach maintains that the legitimacy that underscores this ecclesial order is the exclusive remit of those in authority and does not reflect the collective will of the people. Fuellenbach contends that, within this framework, those on the margins subscribe to the dictates of those in positions of superiority and acquiesce to the norms that they impose:

Yet, in fact, only male celibates are allowed to participate actively in the governing power of the church... Authority here is legitimated neither by the majority nor by consensus, but symbolically by Christ, who instituted the sacrament of orders. It is difficult to see how more participatory ways of government could be introduced into such an understanding of authority. (Fuellenbach, 1995:261)

Cooke underlines how the Church has traditionally bestowed privileged powers on the hierarchy at the expense of encouraging the people to become active participants in the life of the Church. Cooke maintains that through the ages the Church became absorbed into the political structures that dominated Western civilisation and gradually acquired a model of governance that permitted those in leadership to become “identified with one another in a

special fashion” and to view themselves as a “community of rulers within the larger community of believers” (Cooke, 1976:196). Metz views this model of authority as “a relic of feudal society and of that society’s patriarchal, hierarchical structure, against which the bourgeoisie had successfully asserted itself” (Metz, 2007:53). Cosgrove captures the impact this model of governance has had on the Church through the centuries:

At all levels, and especially at the level of the papacy, the judgments of Church authorities were unquestioned and indeed unquestionable... And this percolated down to the levels of the diocese and the parish, and was reflected in the manner in which bishops and priests in parishes exercised their authority and understood their role. (Cosgrove, 1995:28)

Cooke acknowledges that in the past “power flowed downward” (Cooke, 1976:199) and the faithful passively accepted all that was ordained by those in authority. In the process, they became alienated, disillusioned by their own inability to effect change and resigned to the dictates of the institution no matter how stifling and oppressive they were. Cooke argues that the impetus for this change must come from the people themselves as they “exercise their own initiative” and “resist the attempts of church officials to control their activity” (Cooke, 1976:206). Cooke is convinced that the time has come for those on the periphery to step forward and release their creative talents into the Church dynamic. Participation and critical inquiry must replace passivity and blind acceptance. For Cooke, reflection and critical discourse on ecclesial matters must become the responsibility of all the faithful, lay and clergy alike, if the decisions that follow are to draw the Church closer to the ideal of Christian community envisaged in the Gospel:

We can say that the understanding of authority in the life of the church must be basically changed, that there is no place in the church for “rulers,” and that the clergy/laity division was to a large extent a deviation from the authentic ideal of Christian community and no theological justification can be found for allowing it to continue. (Cooke, 1976:196-197)

Kenan Osborne, in his book *Lay Ministry in the Catholic Church* (1993), points out that to properly understand the relationship between “lay” and “cleric” it is first necessary to understand the category “ordo” which, as he explains detailedly, establishes the difference between the two as being institutionalised (Osborne, 1993:308-330). This institutionalisation culminated in the scholastic period, according to Osborne, with the belief that there was an ontological difference between the two arising out of a long-

standing dispute about authority between the Pope and the Emperor. Thus, what began as a creeping separation between two aspects of the life of the Church came to be established and justified theologically during the scholastic period. Shaw argues that the clericalist mindset does “fundamentally distort, disrupt, and poison the Christian lives of members of the Church, clergy and laity alike, and weakens the Church in her mission of service to the world” (Shaw, 1993:13). Hypher underscores the need to promote a paradigm of Church that affords the laity a greater say in decision-making processes so that the partition between laity and clergy is finally dismantled: “At present the call to collaborative partnership of lay people and clergy is blighted by a poor exercise of authority by the clergy and by poor decision-making processes” (Hypher, 2007:104). Whelan echoes this view and contends that structures that promote division and disunity contradict what lies at the essence of the Christian story and ultimately inhibit the Church from testifying to the liberating power of the message it seeks to proclaim to the world:

We ended up with two types of Christians, those who belonged to the clerical state and those who belonged to the lay state. The very concept questions the credibility of church being a community of gospel communities... It is difficult to see how a church can live faithfully Christ's option for the marginalised and be a sign of hope for those disenfranchised by society, while at the same time continuing to attribute status (though in the name of “service”) to a small select group. (Whelan, 1998:48)

The questions remain; are the laity an integral part of the Church's mission in the world and are those in leadership within the current hierarchical structures open to the possibilities that those once silenced on the periphery of the Church present? Pope Francis calls on those in positions of authority within the Church to move beyond the inclination to preserve and propagate the traditional structures they have inherited from the past and begin to anticipate ways in which the transformative power of this same tradition can be translated into each new historical epoch:

If a Christian is restorationist, a legalist, if he wants everything clear and safe, then he will find nothing. Tradition and memory of the past must help us to have the courage to open up new areas to God. Those who today always look for disciplinarian solutions, those who long for an exaggerated doctrinal ‘security’, those who stubbornly try to recover a past that no longer exists – they have a static and inward-directed view of things. (Pope Francis, 2013:11)

Vatican pronouncements under the tenure of Pope Benedict XVI have repeatedly underlined the need to preserve the ordained priesthood from any diminishment or confusion. In his address to a group of German bishops during their quinquennial “*ad limina apostolorum*” visit to Rome in 2006, Pope Benedict re-affirms unequivocally his deep resistance to their calls for greater collaboration between the laity and the clergy in administering to the needs of the faithful in parish communities in their homeland. Pope Benedict XVI cautions against new initiatives aimed at “modification and restructuring of pastoral care which threaten to blur the image of the parish priest” and urges the Bishops to ensure that structural reforms, where necessary, “are in full harmony with the Church’s teaching on the priesthood and with her juridical norms” and “in no way lessens the magnetism of the priestly ministry” (Pope Benedict XVI, 2006). Cardinal Suenens, in contrast, argued in 1968 that if the Church turns its back on the Council and ignores the call for greater co-responsibility between the hierarchy and the people, those in authority run the risk of compromising their commitment to reform in the Church and obstructing the legitimate right of the faithful to participate actively in the governance of their local parish community. Suenens underlines that “coresponsibility” cannot be understood in a way that is partial or incomplete:

If we were to be asked what we consider to be that seed of life deriving from the council which is most fruitful in pastoral consequences, we would answer without any hesitation: it is the rediscovery of the people of God as a whole, as a single reality; and then by way of consequence, the coresponsibility thus implied for every member of the church. (Suenens, 1968:30)

Collins argues that the reticence on the part of elements in the hierarchy to give adequate recognition to the potential of the laity to take on new roles in Church ministries has effectively impeded the Church from harnessing the creative dynamism of its people. Citing the ‘Montreal Report on Ministry’, Collins argues that the time has come for a more inclusive Church and calls for a widening of the ambit of ministry beyond the clerical domain so that the Church becomes energised anew by the gifts and talents at its disposal among the people: “There have been times in the past when the word ‘layman’ was understood to refer to someone who had a merely passive role in the life of the Church, and the word ‘ministry’ referred exclusively to the full-time professional service of the Church. That time is past” (Montreal Bishops in Collins, 2012:14-15). In his pastoral letter on ministry (2000), Cardinal Roger Mahony, Archbishop of Los Angeles, captures the

inordinate potential of the laity to bring renewed impetus to the movement of the Church in the world today:

It has taken the shortage of priestly and religious vocations to awaken in us an appreciation of a broadly based shared ministry...What some refer to as a 'vocations crisis' is, rather, one of the many fruits of the Second Vatican Council, a sign of God's deep love for the Church, and an invitation to a more creative and effective ordering of gifts and energy in the Body of Christ. This is a time of great challenge and opportunity in the Church. (Mahony, 2000:47)

The inference is clear; an acceptance of the opportunities that lay ministry opens up for the universal Church is an acceptance that ministry is not something that the Church does, it is something that the Church is. Kreamer captures this emphatically when he argues that "the ministry of the laity is as constituent for the true being and calling of the Church as the ministry of the 'ministry' (the office-bearers or clergy)" (Kreamer in Collins, 2012:15). Such a framework for understanding ministry is relatively new for many local Churches with the consequence that a somewhat unprepared approach to how ministry can be understood, described, and assimilated into the normal parish structure is not unusual. Convey argues that the Church in Ireland has functioned historically without such a developed understanding and application of lay ministry:

There must be no other majority Church in any other country in the world which does not employ lay people to work in pastoral teams with priests and sisters, and to contribute their creativity in fashioning a whole variety of new Church structures to preach and embody the gospel effectively for the men and women of our time. (Convey, 1994:18)

Rahner maintains that the Church must embrace the opportunity for renewal that this moment in its evolution through history presents. Rahner believes that now is the time to "lend a sharper ear, a keener eye, a livelier anticipation to the slightest indication that somewhere that Spirit is stirring whose inspiration is not merely confined to the official pronouncements and directives of the church" (Rahner, 1992:247). Rahner argues that the onus now rests with the people to breathe life into the Church's mission in the world and dare to anticipate a new way of being Church rather than simply replicate the ways of the past: "The surest way is the boldest, and that the best chance to gain all, or at any rate something, is not caution, but the utmost boldness in taking risks" (Rahner, 1992:248). Moltmann articulates the need for a new resolve among the laity to re-claim their place at

the heart of the Church and begin to orientate the Church in a new direction: “The passive, subservient attitude towards ‘the people at the top’ gives way to an independent sense of freedom and responsibility” (Moltmann, 1977:331). Congar detects a radical shift towards new forms of democracy and participation in places of great political upheaval around the world and believes that the voice of those once silenced in oppressive regimes is now becoming a force for change in the world. Congar recognises how the resolve among marginalised peoples to become free and responsible subjects in their society is giving renewed impetus to the activity of the local Churches the world over:

Today people no longer want to be objects but subjects... That is true in all spheres: in political life, in the Church generally and more specifically in the local churches as over against the central Roman authority. (Congar, 1988:67)

Moltmann is in no doubt that resistance to change and strict adherence to the ways of the past must give way to a new openness to the possibilities that this time presents if a more authentic way of being Church in the world is to emerge: “In this case they will not be the bricks for a church of an elite; they will be the bricks for a people’s church worthy of the name” (Moltmann, 1977:330). Moltmann maintains that the identity of the Church is an intrinsically bound to “the movement of this history, for it is itself standing in the midst of that movement, not above it and not at its end” (Moltmann, 1977:52). Haight views the Church as an evolving dynamism that grows in accordance with the efforts of the people to give expression to the potency of the Christian story in the immediacy of their surroundings: “The question of the nature of the Church becomes less a question of a static essential structure, and more a question of the dynamic relationship that this institution bears in relation to God” (Haight, 1985:167). Haight insists that the movement of the Church must be become synonymous with communities of faith that are animated by God’s ongoing participation in their history: “The divine nature of the Church must be seen in how this historical community is related to God’s action in history” (Haight, 1985:167). Schillebeeckx acclaims the contribution of small communities of faith that have aligned themselves more closely with the vision and values of the Gospel and draws inspiration from their unique testimony to the Christian story: “I prefer an ecclesiology in a minor key, not a grand ecclesiology. Many Christians do not agree with the vision of a grand and powerful church. They are for a modest ecclesiology” (Schillebeeckx, 1994:74). Schillebeeckx views the decline in vocations that is particularly acute in the Western world

as an opportunity for a new ecclesial enterprise that attributes more authority to people once consigned to the periphery of the Church:

There are many lay Christians who are involving themselves in the world. At one time this role was filled only by priests and religious. So this is a shift, not a loss. This crisis heralds new times. There is a need not so much for new orders, congregations, institutions, as for new orientations of these which will clearly bring a change to their very structures. (Schillebeeckx, 1994:78)

4.3.2 Communities Empowered by the Gifts of the Spirit

Moltmann believes that this moment in history presents the Church with the opportunity to explore new frontiers and to traverse previously uncharted roads so as to pave the way for a more participatory and inclusive Church to emerge. Moltmann sees evidence of model of Church community slowly evolving on the periphery of the traditional structures: “These core communities and core groups are expected to give new life to the congregations of the established church and at the same time to strike out new paths linking the church to society as a whole” (Moltmann, 1977:332). Moltmann believes that what distinguishes these communities is that they are propelled by the dynamism of the people as they “become the subject of their own history in the liberating history of God” (Moltmann, 1977:330). Rahner maintains that in this new ecclesial environment debate, dialogue and even divergence of opinion are encouraged, opening the gateway for real renewal within the Church. It is then, he insists, that the Church becomes empowered by its own people and the ongoing manifestation of God’s presence in the world takes precedence over any attempts to contain or objectify this presence:

For it is God and God alone who builds the one church, shaping the true course of its history as God wills out of the materials of the multiplicity of spirits, tasks, and ministries in the church, and out of the ensuing tensions and oppositions which are so necessary. (Rahner, 1992:249)

Fuellenbach believes that these communities recognise that they are a people constantly on the road rather than already having reached their destiny and that the ongoing dynamism of the Spirit is what sustains them along the way: “The church’s mission is to release the end-time Spirit, who is operative in the church as the future of the world, with the intention of leading creation into its final destiny” (Fuellenbach, 1995:260). Fuellenbach believes that the vibrancy and energy of these communities testify to the enduring presence of the Spirit

in their midst. Fuellenbach recognises the inherent challenge that these communities present to the wider Church:

The church, perceived as a “creation of the Holy Spirit,” opens a new way of conceiving the church as a charismatic community in which every member has a function. Each member has received a charism for the building up of the whole community. The well-being of the eschatological community depends on the exercise of these gifts. (Fuellenbach, 1995:260)

Dulles realises that this ecclesial dynamic “calls attention to the ongoing relationship of the Church to Christ, its Lord, who continues to direct it through his Spirit” (Dulles, 1987:206). Dulles insists that when Christian communities elicit the inordinate reserves of talent within its people, they assimilate their earthly activities into the all encompassing activity of the Spirit and become sacramental. It is then that “the Church becomes an event of grace as the lives of its members are transformed in hope, in joy, in self-forgetful love, in peace, in patience, and in all other Christlike virtues” (Dulles, 1987:70). Cooke acclaims the vitality and creative energy that is palpable in these communities and underlines the “need to pay renewed respect to the action of the Spirit in the community” (Cooke, 1976:198). Cooke maintains that the new ministries that are promoted in these communities extend the Spirit’s sphere of influence beyond the highly regulated and uniformed dictates of the traditional Church into the domain of the people. In so doing, these communities open up new possibilities in Christian ministry that narrows the divide between their activities and the wider movement of the Spirit:

Moreover, since the discernment of spirits is something that involves the entire church, not just its official leadership, the entire community must in ways appropriate to a given instance participate in the discovery of the charisms granted to individuals or groups for the sake of the church. (Cooke, 1976:198)

Dulles recognises that the hallmark of these communities is the intrinsic value given to every individual within the community. Each person is endowed with distinctive gifts and capabilities that are integral to the life of the community: “The Church is not a club of like-minded individuals, but a venture in which all depend on the community and are obliged to make contributions to the community and its work” (Dulles, 1983:15). Discipleship in these communities is viewed “not a purely individualistic enterprise, but a common task in which the mutual relationships of the members are inseparable from the relationship of each to the Lord” (Dulles, 1983:15). O’ Meara underlines the potential of each member of

the Christian community to mediate the presence of the Spirit: “Charism ultimately is grace; as such it is a dialogue, a conversation between the Spirit and an individual Christian. The Spirit holds within its being infinite possibilities, and so the individual members of the community have their own pneumatic identities” (O’ Meara, 1999:205). Moltmann sees evidence of a decisive shift in how we understand ministry; from something bestowed purely on those in privileged positions within the hierarchy to a responsibility shared by all Christians as members of the Church. Moltmann insists that each Christian is endowed with distinctive talents that can contribute to the life of their community:

The charismata are by no means to be seen merely in the ‘special ministries’ of the gathered community. Every member of the messianic community is a charismatic, not only in the community’s solemn assemblies but every day, when members are scattered and isolated in the world. (Moltmann, 1977:296)

Pope John Paul II’s *Redemptoris Missio* (1990) promotes a move away from a more centralised model of governance towards more grassroots faith communities that live in accordance with the values of the Gospel. The encyclical underlines how these communities need to be embraced by ecclesial authorities as a source of great hope for the life of the Church, recognising that “when these movements humbly seek to become part of the life of the local Churches and are welcomed by bishops and priests within diocesan and parish structures, they represent a true gift of God” (Pope John Paul II, 1990:72). Ecclesial communities at the base of the Church, Pope John Paul II claims, “decentralize and organize the parish community to which they always remain united” (Pope John Paul II, 1990:51). Pope John Paul II maintains that these communities are antidotes to individualism and to the ethos towards privatisation, and, as such, represent a “solid starting point for a new society based on a civilisation of love” (Pope John Paul II, 1990:51). In acknowledging these communities as a constitutive component of the Church in the world, *Redemptoris Missio* nevertheless cautions against destabilising the overarching unity and authority of the existing ecclesial norms. Pope John Paul II acclaims the emergence of these communities but not without an important qualification. The dynamism of these Base Christian Community is placed firmly in the context of the wider movement of the universal Church, and, as such, is understood only insofar as it contributes to the wellbeing of the Church as a whole: “Because the Church is communion,

the new “basic communities”, if they truly live in unity with the Church, are a true expression of communion and a means for the construction of a more profound communion” (Pope John Paul II, 1990:51). Hebblethwaite reiterates this emphasis when he underlines how each Base Christian Community is the “basic cell of the Church... not a breakaway Church, it does not exist in isolation, it is in communion with the rest of the Body, making a single unity” (Hebblethwaite, 1993:7). The Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales in *The Sign We Give* (1995) suggests that “communio” helps to give hierarchy a new understanding beyond that of being the exercise of power over people. The bishop’s message is clear and unequivocal; the dynamism of grassroots Christian communities must be channel through the existing hierarchical structures if they are to remain a legitimate part of the wider body of the Church:

Hierarchy is what holds communion together... it is part of what the spirit gives to enable the Church to be maintained in truth and unity. It exists in dialogue and tension with the wider consensus and various voices of the whole body. (Bishops of England and Wales, 1990:21)

Western progressivist theologians argue that the time has come for Church leaders to break from this hierarchical mindset and anticipate an alternative parish dynamic to the prevailing norms. The danger is that Church authorities will cling rigidly to the accepted structures of the past without embracing the call for reform that these communities present. Brennan, in *Re-Imagining Evangelization – towards the Reign of God and the Communal Parish* (1995), underlines the need for a paradigm shift in parish life and a movement towards embracing the possibilities that grassroots communities present believing that “the emerging paradigm of future church is community” (Brennan, 1995:52). Brennan promotes a new departure from the traditional parish model towards clusters of smaller Christian communities where responsibility is taken by all for ministering to the spiritual and pastoral needs of its participants. The Church now becomes “a network of small groups or communities” wherein “essential ministries of religious education, worship, pastoral care, youth ministry will be done” (Brennan, 1995:49). Ratzinger acclaims the phenomenon of ecclesial communities during the World Congress in 1998 as “irruptions of the Holy Spirit which continually revitalise and renew the structure of the Church” (Ratzinger, 1998:27). In a clear softening of his stance towards Base Christian Communities outlined in *Liberatis Nuntius* (1984) (see Section 3.5, pp.134-146), he details their necessary place throughout Church history in answer to specific needs. Their

survival, he cautions, will only be safeguarded when those in authority accept that “every eruption of the Holy Spirit always upsets human plans... this renewal hardly every occurs entirely without pain and friction” (Ratzinger, 1998:28). Ratzinger is unequivocal in his affirmation of the significance of ecclesial communities: “Apostolic communities appear in ever new forms in history – necessarily so, because they are the Holy Spirit’s answer to the ever changing situation in which the Church lives” (Ratzinger, 1998:28). In an obvious reference to Church authorities, and somewhat ironic in light of subsequent announcements on lay ministry (See Section 4.3.1, p.173), he stresses that recognition needs to be given to these movements as the work of the Spirit, cautioning that “not everything should be fitted into the straightjacket of a single uniform organization; what is needed is less organization and more spirit” (Ratzinger, 1998:29).

Fuellenbach identifies the four cornerstones of ministry in the Base Christian Community: leadership of prayer; proclamation of the gospel in word and sacrament; pastoral care or service; and education or catechesis (Fuellenbach, 2002:146). Each specific ministry is animated by the combined efforts of the community leader and the ministry leader who has specialised skills suited to the distinctive requirements of that ministry. These communities encourage a new style of shared leadership, driven and propelled by one central leader and inspired by the activity of the team of leaders in their respective ministries. This team channel their energies into devising programmes that draw out the innate spiritual reserves of the people and encourage them to discover meaningful ways of giving expression to this life force in their lives. These leaders resist all forms of authoritarianism, preferring to achieve a consensus among the people for any of the projects to be undertaken by the community. O’Halloran captures the impact this has on the dynamics of leadership within the Christian community; “It is better to have a little team of leaders rather than a solitary one in a small Christian Community” (O’Halloran, 1991:101). Fuellenbach contends that the universal Church needs to create a support network for these communities so that the people are equipped with new skills and resources that enable them to be an effective tool of evangelisation in the world. Fuellenbach acknowledges the powerful impact these initiatives can have had on cementing the ties between the community and the wider Church and on providing a more solid foundation for the activity of each ministry within the community:

They need to be trained in this wider perspective. To leave the content and method of this training to the choice of the local parish priest or

animators, and thus open up the possibility of it never taking place, would be to give it insufficient emphasis and open the Church to potential fragmentation. (Fuellenbach, 2002:188)

Haight argues that Christian ministry must be anchored in the circumstances and concerns that are unique to each Christian community. Haight maintains that the efficacy of Christian ministry must be measured in terms of the impact it has on the lives of the weak and the poor within the community. Haight is convinced that these new ministries arise out of a process of dialogue within the community and be “determined by the condition of the person, group or whole people to whom ministry is directed” (Haight, 1985:214). Ministries in such diverse spheres as catechetical instruction or liturgical celebration exist side by side with ministries in the areas of social justice, social care and education believing that “the whole Church should turn its attention to the global problems of human suffering, the option for the poor should be precisely an option of the whole Church including the wealthy and affluent” (Haight, 1985:220). In his book *Theology of Ministry* (1999), O’ Meara clarifies how ministry of service is not only carried out by the Church; it effectively constitutes what it means to be Church in the world today:

The church must encourage real universality of ministry and not reduce it to symbols and metaphors or casual kindness. If the first Christians had exercised only good cheer, the Gospel would still be in the suburbs of Jerusalem. A sign can be an image, a gesture, and so serve grace, but normally ministry is more than signs. (O’ Meara, 1999:145)

Haight sees evidence of new forms of ministry directed in service of the poor emerging in these communities that empower the poor within and beyond their confines to overcome their own fatalism and dependence and begin to shape and influence their own destinies. These ministries, in turn, provide an opening for the poor themselves to exercise new responsibilities and ministries so that they too become intrinsic to the life of the Church in their local community. Haight believes that Christian ministry must take cognisance of the potential of the people to exert a liberating influence in the world and be defined in accordance with the creativity and dynamism that they bring to their faith:

At this point Christian ministry makes a choice. Christian faith and love impels an analysis of such situations from the point of view of the victims of society, and its ministry should be dedicated to a change that engenders equality. (Haight, 1985:231)

Moltmann contends that the emergence of new ministries in these communities provides a channel for the Spirit to pour out into the vast array of activities that are integral to the life of the community. Some ministries in the areas of worship and religious instruction are directed toward the inner life of the community while others in the sphere of education and social justice are directed outwards and contribute to the growth and development of the entire community. Moltmann contends that Christian ministry must be concerned with every dimension of life and not limited to some exclusive spiritual or religious sphere:

Everywhere Christians stand face to face with the coming Lord of the world- not merely in their assemblies but in their dispersion as well. This outlook determines not only the life and powers of the apostles, pastors, deacons and congregational leaders, but the ministries performed by Christians in everyday life also. (Moltmann, 1977:297)

Cooke underlines how each community determines who their leaders are on the basis of their proven commitment to the Gospel and their selfless resolve to bring the Good News to life in ways that enhances the wellbeing of the entire community: “Clearly, this kind of leadership is not something that derives from an office or that is limited to those possessing office” (Cooke, 1976:208). Cooke understands that the leaders of these communities are attuned to the deeper movement of the divine Spirit within and beyond the confines of the community and can initiate programmes and activities that release this presence into the life of the community. Cooke maintains that great spiritual leaders have the capacity to release the healing presence of the Spirit into the life of the community and create new opportunities for the people to come to experience God’s love in the cut and thrust of their history:

Those who meet such Christians encounter a presence of the Spirit and can themselves become more intensely inspired, which is another way of saying that such Spirit-filled Christians act sacramentally on their fellows, or of saying that they act as instruments of grace for others. (Cooke, 1976:208)

Western progressivist theology underlines how communities charged by the power of the Spirit provide a template for a new dynamic of Church, one energised by the potency of its source as it is revealed in the energies and creativity of its people and reverberates outwards to impact on the activity of the Church throughout the world. Essentially, the Spirit is the common chord that fuses the many diverse and distinctive features of each community into one cohesive body of Christians in the world. Dulles captures this

succinctly: “The Church, according to this view, is a great community made up of many interlocking communities. Thanks to the unifying presence of the Holy Spirit, the many families of Christians are woven into a single large family” (Dulles, 1987:57). Moltmann argues that if the Church retreats from history, it effectively severs its ties with the recurring presence of the Spirit in the world. Critically, Moltmann insists that it is only when the Church immerses itself in the struggles of its people and is energised by their resilience and compassion that it will be invigorated by the power of the Spirit. For Moltmann, Christian communities that empower the poor and promote their liberation are more susceptible to the activity of the Spirit. It is then that the ‘movement’ of the Church and the ‘movement’ of God converge to create the conditions for the Spirit to become an integral part of the evolving story of humanity:

The Spirit of God makes the impossible possible; he creates faith where there is nothing else to believe in; he creates love where there is nothing lovable; he creates hope where there is nothing to hope for... The Spirit of God works in history as the creator of a new future and as the new creator of what is transient for this future. (Moltmann, 1977:191)

4.4 Interpreting the Gospel in Light of the Challenges of Our Time

This theme explores how Western theological inquiry in recent decades promotes a model of Christian community that has the potential to contribute to the advancement of the kingdom in the world today. Section 4.4.1 (pp184-188) examines the centrality of the kingdom in Western progressivist theology and illustrates the contribution of these theologians in adding greater clarity to the eschatological premise on which the Church is founded. Section 4.4.2 (pp.188-192) explores how Western theology emphasises the need for the Church to retrieve its prophetic voice and to signify within its structures a counter movement to the prevailing ideologies that dominant contemporary society. Section 4.4.3 (pp.192-196) explores the dynamic of liberative praxis from the perspective of Western theological inquiry and examines its effectiveness in giving new impetus to the task of bringing the Gospel to life in the world today. The International Synod of Bishops in 1971 underlines the need to re-interpret the Gospel in light of the obdurate social realities that people have to endure in each new historical epoch so that scriptural reflection becomes a springboard for transformation in the world. The promotion of justice is viewed as a

constituent component in the proclamation of the Gospel message and the scope of the Church's mission in the world today is revised accordingly:

Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of preaching the gospel, or, in other words, of the Church's mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation. (World Synod of Bishops, 1971: par. 6)

4.4.1 Re-positioning the Kingdom at the Heart of the Church's Mission

Western progressivist theology underlines how the Church can perpetuate in history the movement that Jesus began and forge a new era for humanity that safeguards the needs of those most alienated and oppressed in the world. Haight acclaims the emergence of Christian communities around the world that give primacy to translating the Gospel message into their history in meaningful ways and to ensuring that the legacy of Jesus lives on through their compassion and solidarity for their neighbour: "This community, then, is the Church of Jesus Christ whose mission in the world is to carry forward in history what Jesus did during his lifetime" (Haight, 1985:175). Faith in these communities is about assimilating the world of ritual and worship into the world of everyday and bringing a unique Christian perspective to bear on the more oppressive aspects of life. The people effectively move from being recipients of the Gospel message to being bearers of this message; co-operatives are set up to promote employment, educational programmes are implemented to empower those previously consigned to the margins and medical services are improved so that the needs of the weak and the infirm are catered for. Haight underlines how these communities release the potency of human goodness into the world and actualise love in ways that empowers those most alienated in their midst: "Justice is the medium of love and indeed at this basic level is the criterion and judge of love" (Haight, 1985:79).

Haight believes that when the values of the Gospel are embodied in the life of the community in tangible ways, it provides the catalyst necessary for the kingdom to be rolled out in history: "This spirituality has a faith that sees the Kingdom of God in the little bits and pieces of history where people are being served and cared for by other people" (Haight, 1985:256). Haight argues that through their love and compassion for those who are impoverished, these communities become places where authentic discipleship to Jesus

and to the kingdom becomes possible: “God’s action in history is God’s active rule; it is the power of love which attracts or draws human freedom out of itself and in the direction given in the message of Jesus, the objective Kingdom of God” (Haight, 1985:160). Schillebeeckx argues that the message of the kingdom is not a retreat from the realities of history but an invitation to transform these realities so that humanity can savour in the present something of what awaits civilisation in the future. Schillebeeckx measures the efficacy of each faith community in terms of their capacity to replicate in history what Jesus did during his earthly life and reach out in solidarity to those subjected to great suffering and persecution:

It does so by doing for men and women here and now, in new situations... what Jesus did in his time: raising them up for the coming Kingdom of God, opening up communication among them, caring for the poor and outcast, establishing communal ties within the household of faith and serving all men and women in solidarity. (Schillebeeckx, 1990:157)

Cooke argues that the kingdom provides a framework for the Church to engage in history in a meaningful way. Cooke underlines the creative dynamism of grassroots communities of faith around the world and their accomplishment in discovering ways of embedding the Gospel ideals of love and justice into the immediacy of their surroundings believing that “any movement towards these goals brings the kingdom of God closer to its realization” (Cooke, 1976:391). Cooke maintains that each new historical context provides ample proof that the kingdom is in a continuum between what was inaugurated by the earthly life of Jesus and the goal towards which history is moving. Cooke recognises that: “the historical experience in which we are engaged, imperfect and incomplete though it obviously is, is part of the process of mankind evolving towards its goal and that it is making an intrinsic contribution to that evolution” (Cooke, 1976:394). Rahner argues that Church needs to take cognisance of all that this world reveals if it is to anticipate in each new historical epoch the completion of the kingdom that is to come. Rahner believes that the kingdom does not circumvent history and arrive at its intended destiny unscathed by vagaries of time but gathers momentum over the course of history as it moves relentlessly towards its completion at the end of time:

Yet the Kingdom of God is not simply something due to come later, which later will replace the world, its history and the outcome of

history. The Kingdom of God itself is coming to be in the history of the world. (Rahner, 1968:348)

Bredin underlines how Jesus used meals to “proclaim and celebrate God’s love as all-inclusive” (Bredin, 1985:114). In this way, he explains, the offer of love was freely extended to everyone, to rich and poor. No one was excluded from his table. Bredin explains that bread breaking is the inclusiveness of divine love in action. It also has an eschatological dimension: “Jesus maintained that in his preaching and in his bread-breaking with outcasts he was anticipating the messianic banquet of the last times when the love of God for all would be revealed” (Bredin, 1985:117). Moltmann explains how the Christian understanding of the kingdom of God oscillates between what has already been accomplished in history and what is yet to come. Moltmann maintains that the triumph of Risen Christ over death and the subsequent activity of the Spirit to the world signal how “the new world of righteousness and presence of God has already dawned in this one person in the midst of our history of death” (Moltmann, 1973:171). Moltmann argues that the resurrection is a defining point in the evolution of humanity and that the recurring presence of the Spirit in history enables humanity to anticipate in each new generation the promise of what is to come the end of time. Moltmann interprets God’s revelation in history as a call to humanity to bridge the divide between the ‘already’ and the ‘not yet’ so that the oppressive realities that define human existence can give way to a new social dynamic that “sets an open stage for history, and fills it with missionary enterprise and the responsible exercise of hope... setting out towards the promised future” (Moltmann, 1967:86). Moltmann argues that there is an internal dialectic of identification between the cross and the resurrection of Christ that reconciles the promise of the future with the a profound experience in the present of the life force that makes this future possible: “Thus the cross of Christ modifies the resurrection of Christ under the conditions of the suffering of the world so that it changes from being a purely future event to being an event of liberating love” (Moltmann, 1973:185).

Metz too establishes a creative tension between the present and an absolute end time and affirms the continuity between the liberative exploits of humanity in each new age and the future ideal towards which civilisation is moving. History may be oriented toward the future but, according to Metz, it is also true that “the danger of new wars is too close. The irrationalities of our action in the social and political fields are too manifest. There is still

with us the possibility that ‘collective darkness’ will descend upon us” (Metz, 1969:124). Metz contends that the prevalence of so much brutality and conflict in the world is a potent reminder of the need to create a dynamic in history that transforms the memory of suffering into a collective resolve to redress the current course of civilisation: “What emerges from the memory of suffering is a knowledge of the future that does not point to empty anticipation, but looks actively for more human ways of life in the light of our experience of the new creation of man in Christ” (Metz, 1980:112). Metz believes that the goal towards which humanity is moving ultimately depends on the “eschatological proviso” of God and that human endeavour alone will not suffice to bring the kingdom to fruition in history:

For me as a theologian, the future as a whole stands under the eschatological proviso of God. It cannot in its totality become the content of the social and political endeavours of the individual or of single groups, lest it succumb to mystification or totalitarianism. (Metz in Johns, 1976:107)

Haight believes that the meaning of history only becomes apparent when humanity shares in the task of creating a more just and peaceful world. Haight argues that it is incumbent on the faith community to respond to the pressing challenges posed in each new age so that the kingdom is assimilated into the specific circumstances unique to each new historical epoch and cautions that “the mere postulate of another world or an after-life by itself may undermine the meaning of the actual history of this world” (Haight, 1985:134). Haight insists that the promise of the kingdom is not beyond the reach of humanity but becomes an intrinsic component in our history and is most keenly felt when the power of human goodness is seen to triumph in the world: “Human beings contribute to the material of the final kingdom of God. That which human beings accomplish in love will make up the substance of the kingdom of God... what has been productive and supportive of human existence will be the stuff of the eschaton” (Haight, 1999:392). Fuellenbach underscores the role humanity can play in giving impetus to the movement of the kingdom through history: “This world is the arena where God’s ultimate plan for creation unfolds. The Kingdom of God happens here, in the midst of our human affairs. It is meant for this world here and now, although its future fulfillment is still to come” (Fuellenbach, 1995:201). Fuellenbach argues that that this synergy between humanity and God is integral to the

process of rolling out the kingdom through the ages and that humanity can advance in history the promise of what God alone can determine at the end of time:

We cannot create or build the Kingdom of God. It is God's work and gracious gift, but our actions on earth make a difference. What will be transformed is our world as we have made it, at the time determined by God. The content, the color, the design, will have our imprint since it will be made out of our history. (Fuellenbach, 1995:203)

4.4.2 Church as Contrast Society

Fuellenbach argues that the time has come for the Church to retrieve its prophetic identity and initiate a counter movement to the dominant ideologies of today that place the lure of material gain and individual success over all other considerations. Fuellenbach contends that the current orientation of Western society essentially pushes human beings into a relentless struggle with one another and widens the divide between those who succeed and those who are left behind. Fuellenbach believes that Christian communities that promote justice and compassion provide an antidote to individualism and competitiveness that defines much of Western society: "The church today must become a contrast society in which the values of the kingdom count and are not compromised for other values no matter how appealing these values may be presented" (Fuellenbach, 2002:205). Rahner believes that the singular ambition that drives contemporary society is at variance with the values of the Gospel and inhibits rather than promotes all that is good in humanity. Rahner emphasises the importance of deviating from the prevailing ecclesial norms and encouraging a new paradigm where the collective wellbeing of the entire community replaces individual self interest. Rahner captures the challenge that these communities present to the wider Church:

We need basic communities... parishes must be transformed from units of authoritarian ecclesiastical territorial administration, and service stations catering to purely individualistic needs, into true communities, in which Christians live in a brotherly and sisterly fashion, united in the one Spirit who builds church. (Rahner, 1992:317)

Rahner believes that these "basic communities" offer new possibilities for the growing numbers of people who feel disenchanting and alienated in more affluent societies. Rahner maintains that Western society has lost its way and has relinquished the core values needed

to sustain it. Rahner alludes to a new type of poverty that permeates much of Western society, a deep-rooted spiritual poverty that differs considerably from the oppression and suffering that characterises poverty in less developed countries but is equally insidious and destructive. The sense of being alone and abandoned to a system that is indifferent to your plight is one that is applicable to the West just as it is to the developing world. An increasingly competitive and consumerist world, in his view, leaves many people struggling for meaning and contentment in life:

In an ever more anonymous and anonymously guided society like ours today, human beings are being forced to live in an ever more isolated fashion, in lonely helplessness and abandonment with respect to a good many of their needs and requirements, in which neither secular society nor today's average parish can come to their aid... but only the heart of our brotherly or sisterly neighbour. (Rahner, 1992: 316)

Rahner writes in *Basic Communities* (1983) that “basic communities are necessary for the churches today. The churches of the future will be built up from below by basic communities formed by free initiative and association” (Rahner, 1983:159). Due to the accelerated fragmentation and privatisation in contemporary Western culture, Rahner sees evidence of increasing number of people searching for a “solitary, immediate experience of God and his Spirit” in a more vibrant way than he/she had experienced hitherto (Rahner, 1983:150). Rahner prophetically cautions that it will be some time before Church reinvention through Base Christian Communities flourishes in Western civilisation given the deeply ingrained spiritual individualism we have inherited from the past:

... in the spirituality of the future as such, I suspect that the element of a fraternal, spiritual fellowship, of a communally lived spirituality, can play a greater part and be slowly but courageously acquired and developed. (Rahner, 1983:152)

Fuellenbach argues that the kingdom provides the template for a new way for humanity to live together and is in no doubt that the ultimate norm for these new social and communal structures must be solidarity and justice: “This model sees the Kingdom as a call to justice in society according to the values of the Kingdom. It shows particular concern for the poor and oppressed, the victims of society” (Fuellenbach, 1995:256). Fuellenbach insists that the Christian community needs to be counter-cultural and create an environment where it becomes possible to live in accordance with the Gospel: “The Kingdom is a reality and a set of values to be lived out now, in the present order, in radical obedience to the gospel

and in opposition to the powers of the present age” (Fuellenbach, 1995:256). Fuellenbach believes that the Church must discover an alternative path for humanity to follow, one that retrieves the ideals of the Gospel and one that more accurately reflects all that Jesus envisioned for humanity:

The church must offer a different view of society, one in which all those who cannot compete will be regarded first as brothers and sisters in a society in which the ultimate values will be compassion and justice... the great community where everybody counts and everyone is brother or sister to the others. (Fuellenbach, 2002:205)

Brueggemann believes that the universal Church must promote a new paradigm of community that embodies an alternative to the mentality and perception of the dominant culture with its overpowering ethos of individualism and consumerism. Brueggemann maintains that the Church does not exist to propagate the existing order of society but “to evoke an alternative community that knows it is about different things in different ways” (Brueggemann, 1982:110-111). Lohfink cautions against interpreting “contrast society” as communities of pure elite who regard themselves as superior to the rest of humanity. Lohfink recognises that Church as contrast communities within society must retain their humility as well as their humanity as they endeavour to absorb the ideals of the Gospel into the everyday life of the community: “Church as contrast society emerges only when people let themselves be caught by God’s Kingdom present now, including their weaknesses and guilt” (Lohfink in Fuellenbach, 2002:19). Hoban underlines the importance of addressing the challenges presented by an ever-changing cultural and societal environment and encouraging the formation of ecclesial communities that devise ways of reconciling the needs and yearnings of the people with the vision of the Gospel:

We live in a culture that is in continual state of flux. Individualism is becoming the ethos of the day; participation in decision-making that affects the individual is regarded as a personal right not an institutional concession... How can a sense of community be preserved in a world of rampant individualism? How can we find a faith and liturgy that connects with the world we live in? (Hoban, 2002:39)

Haight believes that these communities actualise the potency of love in the world, and, in so doing, forge an indivisible union between humanity and God: “The field for the exercise of freedom, and the possibility for love, is thus everyday life. We are bound or united to God by the way we live our ordinary lives and the responses we make to the opportunities to love in the world” (Haight, 1985:155). Vanier maintains that love binds members of

these communities together and is at its most potent when it is released quietly and humbly to the world: “Love doesn’t mean doing extraordinary things. It means knowing how to do ordinary things with tenderness” (Vanier, 1979:220). Vanier is convinced that when love flows from the individual out into the wider community it can become the source of great renewal within the community. Vanier discovers in the compassion that is palpable in communities of the poor around the world the dawn of a new day of opportunity for the universal Church:

A new hope is indeed being born today... Individualism and technology have gone too far; the illusion of a better world based on economics and technology is evaporating... A renaissance is coming. Soon there will be a multitude of communities founded on adoration and presence to the poor, linked to each other and to the great communities of the Church, which are themselves being renewed... A new Church is indeed being born. (Vanier, 1979:59)

Brueggemann reflects on the need to re-capture prophetic ministries in the life of the Church so that the sense of despondency and despair that prevails in the modern world gives way to a new hope in the possibilities that exist at this time in our history: “Prophetic ministry seeks to penetrate despair so that new futures can be believed in and embraced by us. There is a yearning for energy in a world grown weary” (Brueggemann, 1982:111). Brueggemann alludes to the unique gift of the prophetic leader to anticipate in the present the channel through which the community must pass if their shared aspirations are to be reached in the future: “Prophetic ministry consists of offering an alternative perception of reality and in letting people see their own history in the light of God’s freedom and his will for justice” (Brueggemann, 1982:110). Cooke underlines how the prophetic leader transcends the overwhelming negativity and sense of foreboding that exists in times of crisis and can inject a whole new impetus and optimism into the community. For Cooke, effective leaders can translate their vision into something that the entire community can participate in: “But a group that envisages a goal and truly wishes to attain it must still be encouraged to persevere amid the difficulties that are encountered in reaching the goal. A true leader provides such encouragement by instilling in the group some of his own hope” (Cooke, 1976:208).

Fuellenbach maintains that the identity of each community is very much moulded by the distinctive prophetic charisma of the leader. Fuellenbach contends that prophets have the

capacity to see beyond the existing norms of the community and to anticipate the arrival of what has yet to be accomplished within the life of the community: “The prophet’s task is to keep alive the ministry of imagination, to keep on proposing alternative solutions and futures never thought of” (Fuellenbach, 2002:131). The prophet is fundamentally action oriented; devising initiatives and programmes that mobilise new energies in the people and empower them to bring these energies to bear on the life of their community: “The prophet has to propose new visions to enthuse and to energize people since it is the *not yet*, the promised, and that which is about to begin that can energize us, not what we already possess” (Fuellenbach, 2002:131). Schillebeeckx maintains that a leader needs to be part of a community without ever compromising the unique vision and sense of purpose that he/she brings to the community. Schillebeeckx maintains that prophetic leaders must cultivate some level of detachment and remain “significantly different” from the rest of the community (Schillebeeckx, 1981:138) and retain the objectivity necessary to anticipate what is best for the community at any given time. Cooke underlines how the leader has the capacity to facilitate a process that encourages the community to penetrate through the seemingly implacable realities of life in the community and define a new, more liberating path for the community to follow:

Leadership involves a vision of the goal to which a group should be guided... Leadership involves the capacity to motivate people... to persevere amid the difficulties that are encountered in reaching the goal. A true leader provides such encouragement by instilling in the group some of his/her own hope. (Cooke, 1976:208)

4.4.3 Christian Praxis and the Advancement of the Kingdom

Western progressivist theology argues that Christian praxis sets in motion a new dynamic in Christian witness that can give added momentum to the promotion of the kingdom in the world. O’ Meara views Christian ministry in the context of the advancement of the kingdom through history, filtering out from each Christian community to impact on the lives of those most impoverished within and beyond the community:

Ministry begins with the Christian community and flows out of the community, and nourishes and expands the community... This brings us back to the conviction that ministry serves the kingdom just as the church does... both are creations of the kingdom and have their justification not in themselves but in the kingdom. (O’ Meara, 1999:146)

Lane believes that faith can neither originate nor grow in isolation from the world; its genesis and development is very much determined by the quality of our interaction in this world: “Clearly the praxis of Christian faith is never a purely private affair; it always has some public significance which for Christianity finds its ultimate term of reference in advancing or inhibiting the coming of the Kingdom of God” (Lane, 1984:106). Lane contends that reflection on the Gospel is not confined to some privatised sphere removed from the world of human encounter but finds its deepest resonance when the liberating power of its message is embodied in history:

Responding to the Kingdom of God and working for the Kingdom of God, therefore, requires a whole new style of living and praxis which is directed in service towards the neighbour... this creative praxis, summed up in the great commandment of love of God in love of neighbour. (Lane, 1984: 124)

Metz underlines how Christian praxis facilitates a new departure in scriptural reflection that is grounded in and constituted in concrete history and becomes a praxis of solidarity with those who suffer. Metz considers this new way of faith as a relocation of Christianity in activity, with faith being understood not primarily through beliefs, doctrines, or individual feelings but through “praxis in history and society that is to be understood as hope in solidarity in the God of Jesus as a God of the living and the dead who calls all men to be subjects in his presence” (Metz, 1980:73). Regan argues that Christian communities are liberative in that they reflect beyond their own narrow confines and create the conditions for people to to change societal structures that are perceived to be oppressive or unjust:

The goal is not simply enhancing membership or helping adults attain more knowledge about the faith; the goal is rooted in adults’ membership in an evangelizing community that understands itself to be engaged in the proclamation of the Good News and the transformation of persons and social structures to more clearly reflect God’s reign. (Regan, 2002:80)

Lane insists that our Christian faith does not extricate us from the reality of suffering and injustice but strengthens our resolve to exert a transforming influence in the world so as to create a new social order that restores the inalienable rights and needs of the poor. To remain silent in the face of injustice, he argues, effectively makes us complicit in perpetuating a system that tolerates gross social inequality and widens the divide between

the rich and the poor. To be a voice for the poor means speaking out against the social and political forces that conspire against the poor so as to consolidate the privileges of the rich:

Christian faith cannot exempt itself from some form of political involvement and at the same time claim that commitment to social justice is at the centre of the gospel... To do nothing is to do something; it is to acquiesce in the structures that permit the poor to become poorer and the rich to become richer. (Lane, 1984:136)

Haight maintains that liberative praxis draws people in from the sidelines of ecclesial and societal structures to become central participants in the Church's mission in the world. Haight acclaims the impact liberative praxis has had in mobilising people to exert greater control over their own destinies and bring the liberating power of the Gospel message to bear on their wider social milieu: "Praxis is behavior that is a participation in this movement of history; it is a practice or behavior or struggle to increase freedom in society" (Haight, 1985:41). Haight argues that praxis achieves symmetry between action and reflection on that action that refines our critical consciousness and illumines our search for meaning in life. Haight explains how the meaning is discovered in the action and the ensuing reflection can shape and influence the course of subsequent action. Christian praxis is a continuous cycle of action and discernment on that action in light of scripture that leads the believer to critically engage in the world and release the energies of the kingdom into history. In effect, praxis allows Christians determine the course of history and effect real change in the lives of those who are oppressed:

History is open and in some measure can be directed by human beings. Moreover this history is meant to move in the direction away from human imprisonment, enslavement and oppression of human freedom toward greater liberty and personal and social freedom. (Haight, 1985:41)

Groome believes that Christian praxis facilitates an improved quality of engagement in the world and initiates a style of Christian witness that brings the Gospel to life in the cut and thrust of history: "It is a making present of God's word and an enabling of people, including ourselves to come to speak our own word in a response that is seen in the lives we live" (Groome, 1994:218). Cooke maintains that when Christians reflect on the word of God in light of their ongoing witness to the word in their lives they come to ascertain an entirely new level of significance in all that scripture reveals. Cooke insists that the Word is not just fixed and fossilised in time but evolves over time in correspondence with the

world. For Cooke, the Word effectively comes to life in the process of actualising its meaning in history:

There is also basic and genuine evolution in human affairs and the unexpectedness of the future means also that the word of God possesses always a character of radical “newness”... Within the word of God itself there is growth and change; God does not keep on saying exactly the same thing over and over. (Cooke, 1976:321)

Archbishop Diarmuid Martin argues that this “radical newness” opens the pores of our humanity to the experience of joy: “Christianity is a religion of joy... which can transform the weaknesses, insecurities and anxieties that bear down on the lives of many” (Martin, 2006:1). Martin maintains that reflection on the Christian story orients people to consider the wellbeing of others and this heightened sensitivity to God’s love in their lives “becomes the inspiration and model for a life of charity, of love for other people” enabling them to “enter dynamically into the very process of loving which is characteristic of God” (Martin, 2006:1). Lonergan argues that this new dynamic in scriptural reflection makes it possible for Christians to discover a more authentic way of giving expression to the Christian story in history. Lonergan underlines the transforming impact liberative praxis has on those who engage in distinctive dynamic in Christian witness and argues that the reserves of love and compassion that it elicits from within each person “is above all the making of man, his advance in authenticity, the fulfilment of his affectivity, and the direction of his work to the particular goods and a good of order that are worthwhile” (Lonergan, 1972:52). Groome argues that liberative praxis promotes a new emphasis in Christian witness that is transformative of both the individual and the world:

As a constitutive activity of shared Christian praxis, critical reflection encourages “disbelief” as well as belief, “disbelief” especially toward the controlling myths, both inside and outside us, that maintain structures of domination... Critical reflection on present action can be a source of both personal and social emancipation. (Groome, 1998:189-190)

Metz echoes this view and claims that Christian praxis not only transforms and changes the world, it creates the conditions that enable Christianity to testify to and participate in an anthropological revolution: “For this revolution is not, in fact, concerned with liberating us from our poverty and misery, but rather from our wealth and our totally excessive prosperity. It is not a liberation from what we lack, but from our consumerism in which we are ultimately consuming our very selves (Metz, 1981:42). Fuellenbach underscores the

importance of re-aligning our lives with the “burning center” of history (Fuellenbach, 2002:203) so that each person reaches out beyond themselves and accelerates the arrival of the kingdom in history. It is then that the world of human endeavour and God’s plan for humanity coalesce:

Our experience of the kingdom is not something we can hold for ourselves; our mission is to share this experience so that all may come to see and discover where God is making God’s plan come true. And where we see its presence, we are to celebrate it in order to keep the fire burning. (Fuellenbach, 2002:207)

4.5 Concluding Remarks

This chapter reveals how Western progressivist theologians have signalled a new way forward for the universal Church that parallels the route endorsed by their Latin American counterparts and places “the ecclesial community in the centre, not the hierarchy, with the gifts of the Holy Spirit bestowed on the people for the service of the community” (Carroll, 1987:63). In so doing, this distinctive strand of theology provides an additional layer of theological insight to underscore the distinctive features of a Base Christian Community. Figure 4.1 (p.197) captures the theological framework that gives credence to the defining elements of the model of Church promoted in Western progressivist theology and crystallises the new understanding of Christian ministry that has emerged through this phase of the inquiry.

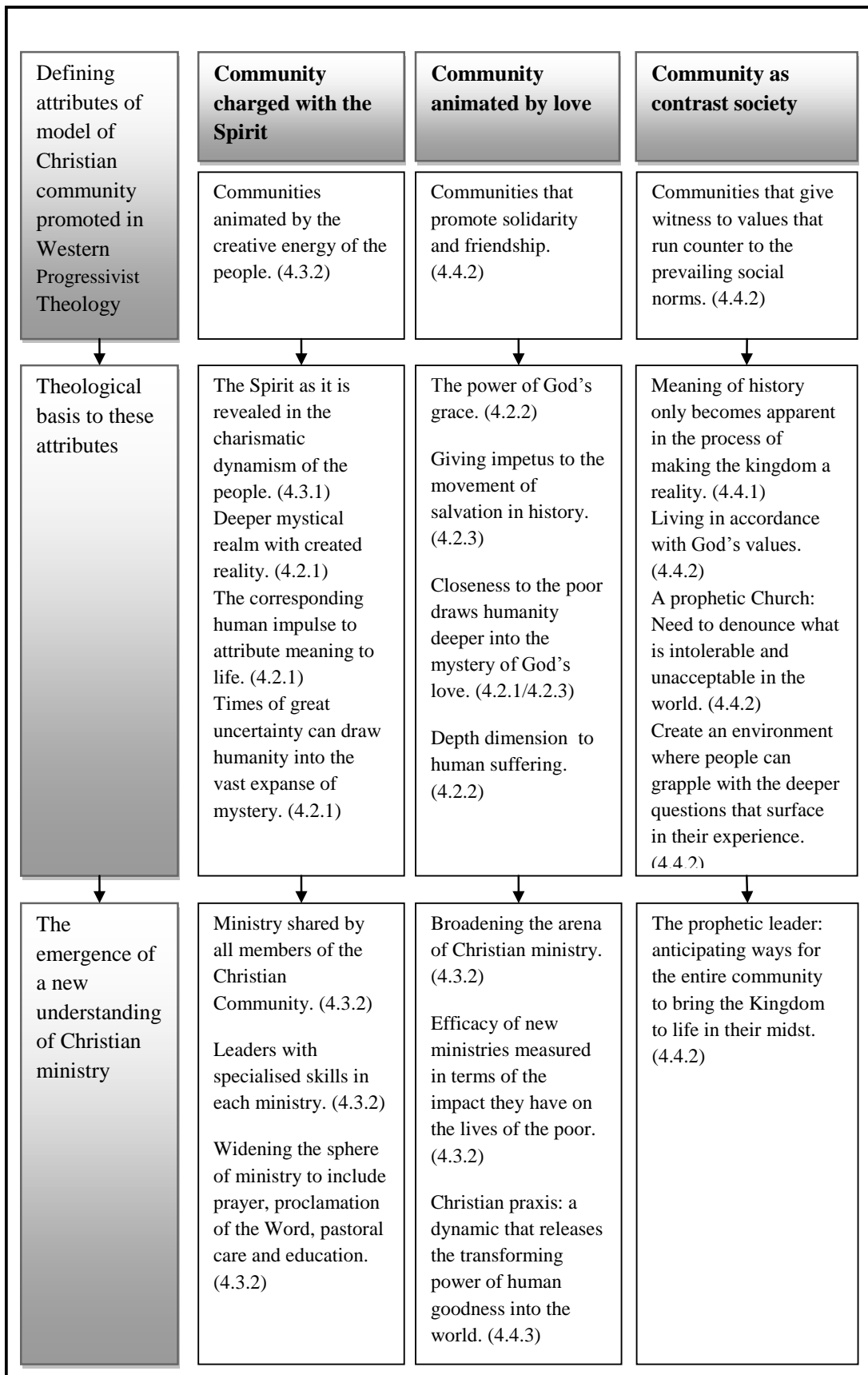


Figure 4.1 Core findings emanating from Western progressivist theology

Western progressivist theology re-defines what it means to be Church in the world. Mich sees evidence of a unifying symmetry between the varying strands of theology that have emerged since Vatican II and the collective resolve of these theologians to re-orientate the Church away from a “centralised and obedient church under the leadership and control of Rome” and towards “a local church that is culturally and historically diverse, semi-autonomous, in unity with the universal church” (Mich, 1998:257). Fuellenbach believes the momentum for ecclesial reform will ultimately be stifled given that under the institutional model the scope of the Church “is limited to the preaching of the word and the administration of the sacraments at the expense of the church’s broader social and political responsibility” (Fuellenbach, 2002:121). Ironically, Pope Paul VI’s *Octogesima Adveniens* (1971) offers a potent reminder that the future of the Church will be determined by communities of faith that respond to the pressing challenges unique to their time and place and ensure that the Word becomes the stimulus for radical transformation in the world:

It is up to the Christian communities to analyze with objectivity the situation which is proper to their own country, to shed on it the light of the Gospel’s unalterable words... It is up to these Christian communities... to discern the options and commitments which are called for in order to bring about the social, political, and economic changes seen in many cases to be urgently needed. (*Octogesima Adveniens*, 1971: Par. 4)

The recurring message in this chapter is that the prevailing hierarchical model of Church effectively sidelines the people to the periphery of the existing structures and prohibits them from participating actively in the governance of the Church. 50 years on from Vatican II and it is clear that the vision of Church envisaged in the Council has yet to be realised. Duffy maintains that while the conciliar ecclesiology of Vatican II paves the way for radical reform in how Catholic Church operates in the world, many people have become disillusioned that “a heavily clerical and authoritarian institution failed to transform itself at once into a place of dialogue and partnership between laity and priesthood” (Duffy, 2003:54). Vatican II’s ‘Decree on the missionary activity of the Church’, *Ad Gentes*, captures the disparity that exists between the ideals of the Council and the reality of the prevailing ecclesial dynamic: “The Church has not be fully established, and is not yet fully alive, nor is it the perfect sign of Christ among men, unless there exists the laity worthy of the name working along with the hierarchy” (*Ad Gentes*, ch.3: no.21). American theologian Paul Lakeland calls for a reevaluation of the role of laity

in the Church today and argues that we must transform our understanding of the divisions of ministry such that the community is no longer divided between priest and people, but rather “between those who exercise a ministry with the community and those whose lay ministry is primarily carried out in the mission to the world” (Lakeland, 2003:267). Lakeland projects beyond the prevailing structures of Church and anticipates a more inclusive and participatory dynamic of governance in traditional parish communities around the world, steered by “a small team of ministers, all of whom will have been ordained by the bishop to celebrate the Eucharist” who recognise their “accountability not only to the local bishop... but most especially to the local community that they serve” (Lakeland, 2003:267-268).

Fuellenbach argues that the hierarchy needs to break free from the rigidity of the traditional structures and discover in the creative energy of its people the source of its renewal. Fuellenbach believes that the Gospel provides the ultimate yardstick by which the efficacy of Christian ministry must be measured and acclaims the evolution of new ministries throughout the world that reflect the needs and aspirations unique to each faith community: “The word here has become the immediate point of reference and the source of inspiration. It is the primary catalyst of the community, since the word, unlike the sacraments, is always within reach” (Fuellenbach, 2002:162). Fuellenbach insists that the Church needs to retrieve the spirit and aspirations of Vatican II and illustrate its commitment to ecclesial reform by granting new responsibilities and powers to those who already exercise leadership in the various ministries within their community: “Why not integrate into the office of ministry other services that many lay people are already performing and empower them for these ministries through the laying on of hands?” (Fuellenbach, 2002:146). In his book *Like His Brothers and Sisters - Ordaining Community Leaders*, the German theologian Fritz Lobinger argues that renewal in the Church is only possible when the traditional barriers between the hierarchy and the people dissolve and “where the ordained ministry is not a separate class but is woven into the believing community” (Lobinger, 1998:73). Lobinger believes that a new style of ordination needs to be introduced for lay men and women with proven discipleship so that they can participate fully in the ministry of the Church:

They consider it vital that the few ordained ones come from the ranks of the many who have been community leaders for many years. All of them wanted to assist the community; they did not aim at priesthood.

They do not have a clericalistic outlook; they have proved over many years that their style of leadership is a non-dominating one seeking the cooperation of the whole community. (Lobinger, 1998:69)

The clear signal emanating from Western progressivist theology is that the emerging dynamic of creative praxis in communities of faith around the world today testifies to a new style of discipleship that makes God's presence more keenly felt. This continuum between reflection and action facilitates a process that encourages the faithful to interpret the Christian story in light of their own efforts to live in accordance with the values of the kingdom. The World Synod of Bishops in 1971 understood that the Church would discover its true identity not by removing itself from the world but by embedding itself in the struggles of its people and "giving witness before the world of the need for love and justice contained in the Gospel message, a witness to be carried out in Church institutions themselves and in the lives of Christians" (World Synod of Bishops, 1971: par. 36). Within this framework, ministry is no longer viewed as an exercise of power but as a means of empowerment. Western progressivist theology reminds us that when the liberating message of the Gospel is embodied in history, the activity of each Christian community bridges the divide between humanity and God and draws civilisation closer to its salvation. The words of Pope Paul VI in his 1967 encyclical *Populorum Progressio* resonate as deeply today as it did almost 50 years ago and underline the urgency of the need to promote a new style of Christian witness that reaches out beyond the traditional boundaries of Church and gives hope to those whose plight can no longer be ignored:

We are all united in this progress toward God. We have desired to remind all men how crucial is the present moment, how urgent the work to be done. The hour for action has now sounded. At stake are the survival of so many innocent children and, for so many families overcome by misery, the access to conditions fit for human beings; at stake are the peace of the world and the future of civilization. It is time for all men and all peoples to face up to their responsibilities. (Pope Paul VI, 1967: par. 80)

Chapter 5: Adapting the Model of Base Christian Community to an Irish Setting

Chapter 5: Adapting the Model of Base Christian Community to an Irish Setting

5.1 Introduction: Liberation Theology and the Irish Context

Liberation Theology impacted greatly on Irish theological discourse in the 1970s and 1980s and gave rise to an upsurge of interest among theologians here in the unique ecclesial vision that was reverberating through communities of the poor across Latin America at this time. Moreover, many religious orders were inspired by returning missionaries to reach out beyond the relative sanctuary of their traditional base and make a clear and unequivocal option for the marginalised in Irish society. Kealy explains how many of these missionaries sought to create a dynamic in their local parish communities that mirrored the vibrancy of the Church they had experienced in Latin America: “Missionaries do not go just to give but to learn, to receive, to bring home to an often tired Church which has much to learn from the younger, fresher Churches abroad” (Kealy, 1977:26). Theological inquiry too was no longer detached from the obdurate social realities that people here had to contend with but reflected a growing resolve among theologians here to anticipate ways in which the momentum that was being generated by grassroots communities in Latin America could be replicated here (See Section 1.1, pp.5-6). In December, 1976, the first conference on the theology of liberation was held in Ireland and explored ways of narrowing the divide between theological discourse and the real and pressing concerns of the people. O’ Sullivan recalls how the speakers responded to the claim that “theology in Ireland was experiencing a Babylonian captivity. It no longer spoke to the real human needs of people and was carried on in the splendid isolation of seminary ivory towers” (O’ Sullivan, 1977:65). The conference viewed the projected decline in vocations as an opportunity for those previously on the periphery of societal and ecclesial structures to become central participants in the life of their local faith community and contribute to the evolution of a new paradigm of Church in Ireland:

... many of the traditional functions of the Christian minister will devolve on members of local communities and local areas. Such communities should even be encouraged to elect their own ministers, who would then be trained for their tasks. In this way, there would exist the very real prospect of an indigenous ministry for an indigenous community. (O’ Sullivan, 1977:67)

The Irish Theological Association (ITA) held a three-day conference entitled ‘Liberation Theology: An Irish Dialogue’ in January 1977 with a view to reflecting on the universal significance of the theology of liberation and its implications for the Church in Ireland. Fagan speaks of the conference as an “experience of liberation” (Fagan, 1977:28) as theologians here began to initiate a corresponding movement in Irish theological inquiry aimed at interpreting the changing vagaries of society in light of the enduring relevance of the Christian story to each new time and place: “If theology is Christian reflection on Christian experience... the agenda of their meetings and study is written by the world in which they live, a world in a process of continual change” (Fagan, 1977:22). O’ Leary captures the importance of grounding Irish theological reflection on the peculiarities unique to Irish society in the belief that “once the cultural context has been determined, real theology must be expressed in terms of that culture, if it is to speak to anyone” (O’ Leary, 1977:97). Kealy cautions that the task of theology is not to simply perpetuate the established formulas of the past but to unearth the significance of these formulas for each new generation, insisting that there is “no such thing as a Christian country, a Christian people, but each generation, each person has to find Christ for itself and to make its own pilgrimage through its own desert of problems” (Kealy, 1977:29). O’ Sullivan detects a decisive shift in focus in theological inquiry in Ireland at this time that reflects the resolve of theologians here to explicate the universality of the Gospel message without losing sight of the particularity of the context wherein this message is lived out. O’ Sullivan acknowledges the role theologians of liberation have played in widening the scope of theology so that it bridges the ideals of the Gospel with the everyday realities unique to each new cultural context and in providing a stimulus for theologians here to exert a transforming influence in Irish society:

Traditionally, theology has been seen as reflection on the Bible, and on doctrines and Church teachings. Its direction of movement has been from the texts of the Bible and the tradition of the Church to the world. Liberation theology, on the other hand, begins with the world, and understands scripture and tradition in terms of it. And so theology itself is liberated by the development of liberation theology. (O’ Sullivan, 1979:2)

Francisco Claver’s reflections at the ITA conference underlines the need for the Church to retrieve its prophetic identity and become synonymous with the promotion of a new social order that protects the inalienable rights of those who are persecuted and voiceless in the

world in each new age. Speaking from the perspective of the persecution of the Filipino people under martial law in his native country, Claver alludes to how the Church can so easily acquiesce to the prevailing societal forces and thereby undermine the “task of evangelisation” by the “general lack of credibility as a witness to the Gospel” (Claver, 1977:44). Claver argues that in order for the Gospel to take root in history, the Church needs to draw its sustenance and direction from its people, requiring humility on the part of those in authority and “genuine faith that the Spirit does indeed breathe not only in the hierarchy but in the people as well” (Claver, 1977:53-54). Claver insists that theologians here need to formulate an Irish ecclesial vision that redresses the polarisation that exists between the laity and the hierarchy and gives impetus to potential of people on the fringes of the Church to testify to a more liberating and more authentic way of living in accordance with the Gospel in Ireland today:

It is a vision that must lead to action by people, for people, with people, a vision to be realised and elaborated further in life, ever evolving into a more and more genuine incarnation of Christ in history. (Claver, 1977:50)

In his address to the conference, Enda McDonagh urges theologians to propose an alternative to the excesses of materialism that are prevalent in Irish society and to “reconcile the God of the oppressed with the God of the oppressor” so that the rich and poor alike can become a force for transformation in Irish society (McDonagh, 1977:26). McDonagh argues that when the privileged in society stand in solidarity with those who are on the margins that the liberator God becomes more easily accessible. Without this compassion for the poor, he cautions, “we have little incentive to unmask him; in our blindness so little insight into his falsity” (McDonagh, 1977:29). Writing in the aftermath of these conferences, O’ Sullivan cautions against the “catastrophic” consequences of simply absorbing the codes of meaning that give credibility to the cultural norms imposed on each new generation when this meaning system negates the dignity and worth of the individual in society and obscures the deeper, spiritual realm to human existence:

As even the most reflective of us can be swayed by new forces of which we are oblivious, this process of being conditioned in our thoughts, feelings, aspirations and actions continues as we grow... we become carriers of a web of meaning not altogether of our own making. (O’ Sullivan, 1979:3)

The pastoral letter entitled *The Work of Justice* was issued by the Irish Bishops Conference in 1977 recognised the stark reality that “at least 20% of the population is indisputably poor” and outlined the Irish hierarchy’s response to the social inequalities that many people on the fringes of society had to contend with (*The Work of Justice*, 1977:53). Kirby argues that whilst the letter does draw attention to the growing disparity between the rich and the poor, it is reluctant to condemn the unjust societal structures that perpetuate inequality and social impoverishment in Irish society. Kirby maintains that the “bishops and church institutions are seen publicly to be more concerned with preserving the status quo in Ireland than with any energetic and singleminded commitment to a just society” (Kirby, 1978:107). O’ Sullivan is more positive in his assessment of the Pastoral Letter believing that it advances the rights and needs of those who are living under intolerable social conditions and establishes the need for Christians here “to become more involved in the future in issues of social justice” (O’ Sullivan, 1978:39). Kirby argues that vague statement of general principles of *The Work of Justice* has the effect of propagating the unjust societal norms rather than strenuously opposing them and undermines the authenticity of the message the Church here seeks to proclaim:

The church has for too long sat on the fence. The struggle for a just society wherever it is waged badly needs the contribution of those committed to the humanism of the Gospel... The reason that the Christian message finds little credibility among the young of Ireland today is that the Church is seen to be supporting and perpetuating a very unjust society. (Kirby, 1978:107)

This view of the Church was reiterated by Sergio Torres and Tissa Balasuriya, two liberation theologians from Chile and Sri Lanka respectively, at a conference in April 1982 entitled ‘The Work of Justice and Christian Liberation’. Kirby reveals how this conference was unique in that it created a climate of dialogue between theologians and oppressed minorities in Irish society and gave Irish theologians the opportunity to “listen to the oppressed and put theology at the service of their liberation” (Kirby, 1982:36). Torres urged those in attendance not to abandon the Church but to free the Church from the clutches of the dominant class and to recognise that the “Bible that has been read by the Church with the ideology of the privileged classes has to be liberated” (Torres in Kirby, 1982:39). The recurring theme of the conference articulated by theologians and marginalised groups alike is that the Church is not oppressive by nature, but “oppressive because it has not lived according to the fullness of the Gospel” (Kirby, 1982:38). The

conference provided a penetrating insight into the sense of alienation and exclusion felt by people on the fringes of society and addressed the core factors that were contributing to the prevalence of injustice in Irish society. Kirby suggests that the conference was “a microcosm” of what theological discourse in Latin America in that it created the conditions for theologians to “look at life from the standpoint of the poor” and to explore practical strategies to “help change their situation” (Kirby, 1982:40).

This chapter assesses the enduring resonance of this period of theological reflection in Ireland and reflects on how the unique ecclesiological vision emanating out of Latin America has provided a springboard for the emergence of grassroots Christian communities here. Lane reflects on the vibrancy that was palpable in theological circles in Ireland at that time and hoped that a more grounded theology would “stir the consciousness of the Christian community to become involved in a spirit of liberating change, with the burning social, political and economic issues facing the world at this critical juncture in its history” (Lane, 1981:365). This chapter examines the extent to which this has happened. The primary aim of the chapter is to capture the inspiration that people in Ireland continue to draw from Liberation Theology and the challenge their witness and convictions present to the Church here.

Through the process of inquiry, it became clear that grassroots communities here view themselves as small Christian communities and believe that ‘small’, as distinct from ‘base’, more accurately reflects what is integral to the identity of their community. The terminology will be adjusted accordingly to reflect the distinctive identity of these communities here (See Section 2.6.2, pp.57-58). In Ireland, this paradigm of Christian community may not necessarily emanate from the base of the Church but from outside the existing boundaries of Church. The movement towards smaller, more intimate faith communities to redress the sense of alienation and estrangement that people feel within the institutional Church is a recurring theme in this chapter.

The findings that are compiled in this chapter are drawn from four distinct avenues of research, each anchored in the concerted efforts of individuals and communities in Ireland to adapt the model of Christian community that is promoted in Liberation Theology to an Irish setting. The first strand of research relates to findings extrapolated from interviews with 10 social justice activists who are ardent proponents of the need for change in the

Church. These individuals are committed to exploring a new path for the Church in Ireland rather than perpetuating what already exists. The second component involves critiquing the findings from interviews with members of social justice groups and small Christian communities here who testify to the enduring relevance of the ecclesiological vision articulated in Liberation Theology for the Church in Ireland today. Action Research provides the third strand of research in this Chapter. The lessons learned from engaging in the process of initiating a small Christian community in the city and from establishing core principles that are essential to the life of each new community provides a new perspective on the challenges involved in adapting this ecclesial model to an Irish context. Paralleling this process are my own observations and reflections as a 'reflective practitioner' in my work with 'The Waterford Omagh Peace Choir'. Through my involvement as Musical Director of the choir, I have implemented, and in some cases adapted to the workings of the choir, some of the guiding principles determined by the focus group to be of real importance in the formation and sustenance of small Christian communities (See Appendix 3, pp.342-345). This constitutes the fourth strand of research in this chapter.

This chapter is structured according to three central themes that have emerged over the course of the interviews and action research in accordance with the approach to thematic analysis outlined in Section 2.4.4 (pp.30-32). This process allows the researcher to collate the findings into distinct meaning sets with a view to ascertaining the implications each strand of inquiry has for the promotion of small Christian communities in Ireland today. Figure 5.1 (p.210) endeavours to crystallise the inalienable contribution of each participant in this research to the findings that emerge through this inquiry. The diverse methodological paths converge to facilitate a new level of understanding of the dynamics of a small Christian community and of the intricacies involved in breathing life into this new paradigm of Church in Ireland today.

Theme 1, 'The Call for Change – Generating New Hope into the Life of the Church' (Section 5.2, pp.211-227), examines the challenges facing the Catholic Church in Ireland from the perspective of social justice activists here who interpret the ecclesiology of liberation in light of the struggles and the hopes of people on the periphery of society in Ireland today. These activists carry the Christian story into the world of those who are voiceless and marginalised in Irish society and participate with them in their struggle for more just and humane living conditions for their families and for their communities. Their

faith is energised by all that they discover among the poor yet they find themselves increasingly alienated from an institutional Church that seems removed from the realities of what people on the margins have to contend with. The theme addresses two fundamental questions; what do these activists consider to be the root cause of the problems that beset the Church in Ireland and where do they see evidence of hope for the Church here at this time?

Theme 2, 'An Irish Perspective on Base Christian Community' (Section 5.3, pp.227-253), offers an Irish theological perspective on the core convictions that animate the life of a small Christian community and illustrates how each defining element of this unique ecclesial dynamic translates into an Irish context. There is a growing acceptance among members of these communities that the hierarchy fails to recognise the intrinsic value of these communities and remains suspicious of any initiative that affords the laity greater responsibility in the life of the Church. This theme establishes how each small Christian community creates an opening for the Spirit to impact within and beyond their immediate surroundings and testifies to the potential of people to become integral to the process of renewal in the Church in Ireland today. Whilst each community provides the space for people to come together to reflect on their lives in light of the inspiration they draw from the Gospel, the danger is that these communities can become somewhat insulated from the world and progressively more removed from the needs of the poor. Theme 2 sheds light on the distinction between a small Christian community and a prayer group and explores how communities that enter into solidarity with those who are voiceless and alienated in Irish society are themselves empowered by all that they discover on the margins. This theme establishes a theological backdrop against which the activities of these communities can be more clearly understood. The question remains; given the sound theological basis on which small Christian communities are grounded, can this emerging ecclesial dynamic provide a template for a new model of Church in Ireland today?

Theme 3, 'Building Small Christian Communities in Ireland' (Section 5.4, pp.253-274), elucidates the essential steps necessary in the formation of a small Christian community, highlighting core guiding principles that must be in place from the beginning if these communities are to endure. Over the past few years, it has become clear that there are many individual and groups searching for a more authentic and more meaningful experience of Church who remain oblivious to the possibilities that this model of Church

presents. The motivation behind this stage of the research is to reveal practical measures that people can take to heighten awareness of the model of small Christian community and to illustrate concrete ways in which people can set the process of forming a small Christian community in motion in their own localities. The only way of critically assessing the effectiveness of these measures is to learn from the process of actualising them into a specific context. The questions this theme addresses anchor the inquiry in this research in a specific context; what are the key considerations that are integral to the process of starting a small Christian community in Ireland and are there strategies that can help to sustain and strengthen these communities as they evolve?

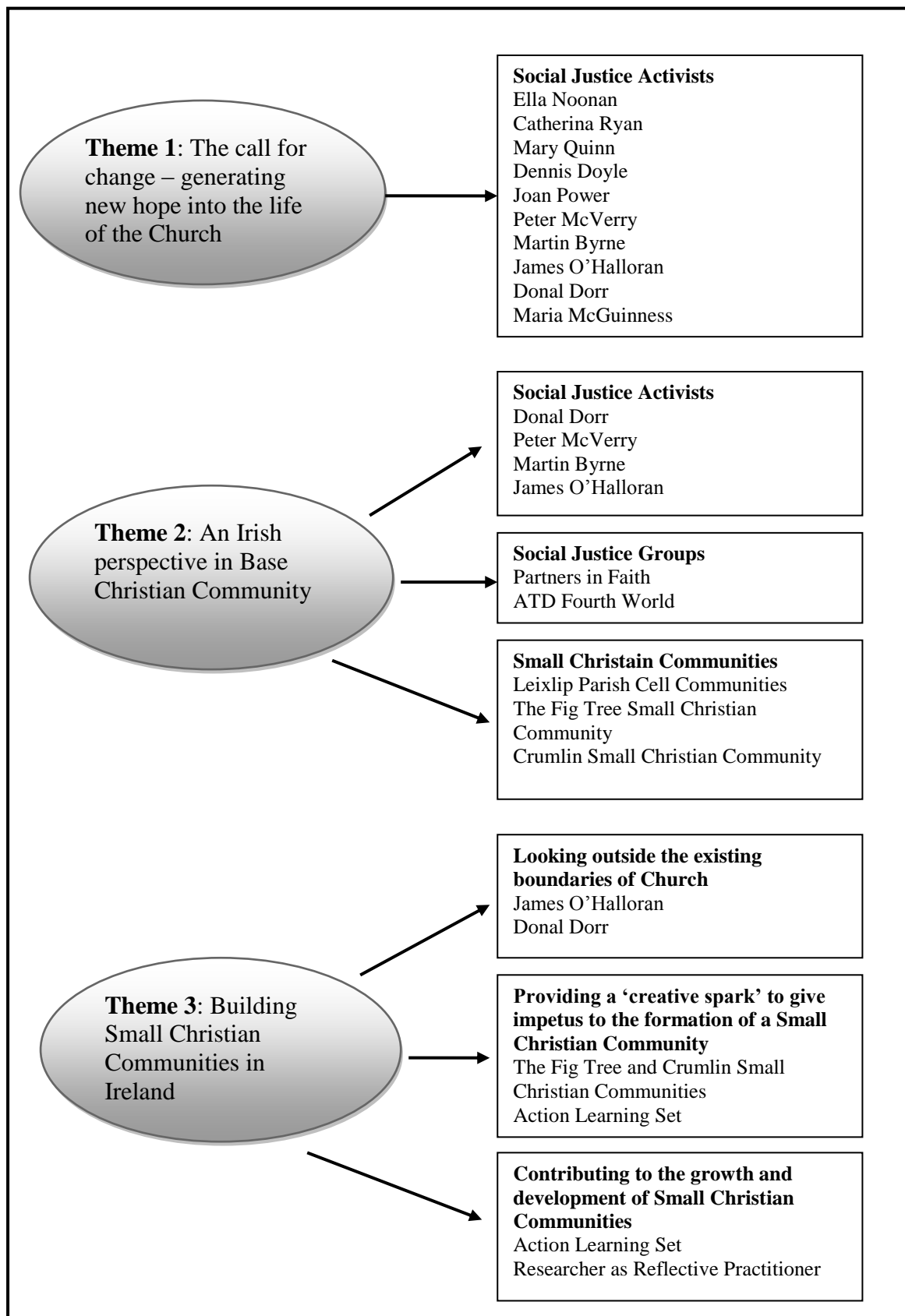


Figure 5.1 Overview of contributors to the findings in Chapter 5

5.2 The Call for Change – Generating Hope into the Church in Ireland

The primary aim of this theme is to explore an Irish perspective on the need for renewal in the Church if it is to more adequately respond to the needs and aspirations of its people. This theme addresses an important question; could this time of unprecedented disillusionment in the Church in Ireland pave the way for a radical transformation in how the Church operates here? Section 5.2.1 (pp.213-222) explores the sense of alienation that is felt by many people on the margins of the Church in Ireland today and the call for a more inclusive and a more compassionate model of Church. Section 5.2.2 (pp.222-227) envisages an alternative vision of Church that reflects a growing defiance among people at the grassroots to map out a new direction for the Church in Ireland. The social justice activists consulted at this phase of the inquiry share a deep and sometimes bewildering sense of despair at the failure of those in leadership within the institutional model of Church to reach beyond its traditional confines and embrace the many pressing challenges that our times present. All of them believe in the importance of seeing beyond the horizon; of moving beyond the shortcomings of the present and anticipating at this moment in history the dawning of a new time of opportunity for the Church here.

To safeguard the identity of 2 of the ten activists who chose to stay anonymous, the 2 lay female activists will now be referred to as Mary Quinn and Joan Power (See Section 2.5.6, pp.50-51). The short background on each of the other 8 activists helps to place their convictions in the wider context of their work. Peter McVerry is a Jesuit priest who has spent many years working with homeless young people. Based at the Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice in Upper Sherrard Street, Dublin, McVerry's work with and campaigning on behalf of troubled young people has made him one of the most prophetic voices for the marginalised in Ireland today. In 1983, McVerry established 'The Arrupe Society', now known as 'The Peter McVerry Trust', to provide accommodation and support for young people who are homeless. *The Meaning is in the Shadows* (2003) and *Jesus Social Revolutionary?* (2008) provide a penetrating insight into the core convictions that underpin his vision of Church and capture the need for a radical reversal in how the Church has traditionally operated in Ireland.

Martin Byrne is a member of 'The Congregation of Christian Brothers' who is living in Dublin's North Inner City and is initiating educational and training programmes for young

people who feel alienated and abandoned within contemporary Irish society. Byrne challenges the assumption that the poor are theologically illiterate and the compilation of stories *Freshly Baked Bread – Urban Contextual Communal Theology in Dublin’s North Wall* (2008) reflects his efforts to encourage the people of the North Wall to write their own theology in response to the oppressive realities they have to endure. The North Wall was once a thriving community with its proximity to the port and the railway line. With the advent of the containership of port traffic, chronic unemployment and questionable housing policy destabilised the community for a long time and has left many families struggling to withstand the upheaval and impoverishment.

Dennis Doyle is a diocesan missionary priest who has returned to Ireland after spending 30 years working in Recife, Brazil. Doyle was profoundly influenced by his Archbishop, Dom Helder Camara, and anticipates a day when Church leaders here will have the courage and the vision to promote a new ecclesial model that reflects the needs and aspirations of those who are voiceless and marginalised in Irish society today. Doyle is now working as a priest in Kilmore Quay, Wexford and is initiating programmes aimed at empowered lay people to exercise greater responsibilities in the life of their local parish community.

James O’ Halloran is a Salesian priest who has worked as promoter and co-ordinator with small Christian communities in Latin America and Africa over the past 40 years and has written extensively on this subject. At the moment, he is based in Ireland and is actively involved in the promotion of small Christian communities in Dublin’s inner city. *In Living Cells: Vision and Practicalities of Small Christian Communities and Groups* (2010), O’ Halloran crystallises his views on the core convictions that underscore the identity of a small Christian community and captures the intricacies involved in giving impetus to this emerging ecclesial dynamic in the world today.

Donal Dorr is a St. Patrick’s Missionary Society priest who discovered a resurgence of the Church among the poor and the oppressed in Base Christian Communities during his time in Africa. A theologian and spiritual animator, Dorr has served as a resource person for the Irish Missionary Union and as a consultor to the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace. Dorr believes that Liberation Theology opens up new possibilities for the Church here that can herald a time of great change and transformation. His books *Mission in today’s world* (2000), *Time for a Change- A fresh look at Spirituality, Sexuality, Globalisation and the*

Church (2004) and *Spirituality of Leadership- Inspiration, Empowerment, Intuition and Discernment* (2006) provide a theological backdrop to this stage of the inquiry and help to anticipate ways of generating renewed impetus into the activity of the Church in Ireland.

Maria McGuinness is a Mercy sister and is the founder of St. Brigid's Social Services in Waterford. Her time spent working as a missionary in Peru was to leave a lasting impression on her. Their boundless reserves of dignity and courage in the face of extreme suffering and destitution has inspired McGuinness to dedicate her energies into championing the rights and needs of those exposed to suffering and injustice in Irish society. McGuinness is an ardent proponent of the need for reform in the Church in Ireland and draws encouragement from the emergence of grassroots faith communities here that are synonymous with outreach programmes that cater for the needs of the poor in society.

Catherina Ryan and Ella Noonan have recently returned from two decades of missionary work in Brazil and acclaim the enthusiasm and dynamism of the people in giving new impetus to the Church in Brazil. Ryan and Noonan worked alongside the poor in the 'favellas' in Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and Recife over the course of their 21 year missionary activity as Sisters of Mercy and shared in their struggle for greater land rights and more humane living conditions. Their critique of the effectiveness of Base Christian Communities in creating the conditions for women to play a central role in the life of faith community is particularly pertinent when it comes to anticipating ways of promoting reform of the traditional dynamic of governance that prevails in the Catholic Church in Ireland today.

5.2.1 Working Towards a More Inclusive Church

Dorr argues that the institutional Church needs to break free from the constraints of clericalism and determine a new way forward in consultation with its people. Dorr maintains that the evolution of the Church in Ireland has reached an impasse that will only be surmounted when those in leadership begin to listen to the people and envisage possibilities beyond the anomalies of the prevailing ecclesial order (See Chapter 1, p.3). Dorr believes that within the framework of the hierarchical model of Church "the idea of consultation does not penetrate the walls of an Institution that is deeply hostile to the democratic process." Dorr contends that the abuse scandals and the subsequent cover-up

by people at the highest levels of authority within the Church has led to a new ‘awakening’ among the faithful of the extent to which the institutional Church has deviated from the values and vision of the Gospel. The credibility bubble has been burst, he insists, and people previously silenced within the Church have begun to find their voice: “The flaws of the current dynamic of Church have never been so pronounced, and, in this climate, the myth of clericalism that has propped up the traditional Church for too long here has finally exploded”. Dorr argues that the clerical mindset is often associated with a certain ambition to ‘climb up the ladder’ and that the “safe men” who ascend upwards are reluctant to relinquish or share their power and privilege. In his book *Time for a Change: A fresh look at Spirituality, Sexuality, Globalisation and the Church* (2004), Dorr clarifies further the essential flaw that impedes the current dynamic of Church here:

Clericalism arises from the concentration of ecclesiastical and theological power in the hands of clergy. It is a situation in which the area of clerical control has expanded to a point where it seems to most people that ‘the church’ equals ‘the institutional or clerical church’. Consequently the activity of lay Christians appears to be marginal to what the church is about; and if it becomes significant it is almost immediately taken under clerical control. (Dorr, 2004:231)

McVerry maintains that the Church in Ireland has been in crisis for some time and that the current plight of the Church affords people the opportunity to vent their anger and frustration at the institution in a way that would not have been possible in the past. McVerry believes that the severity and scale of the abuse scandal in the Church has served to expose the inadequacies of the traditional model of Church, and, in so doing, speed up the alienation that has been felt within the Church for years: “The aura of respectability is now gone and the ostensible signs of crisis are symptomatic of a deeper malaise within the Church that empties its mission here of real meaning.” McVerry argues that the handling of the abuse crisis reveals the extent to which the institutional Church here still elevates the importance of obedience and loyalty over all else. Within this culture, he suggests, any attempts to look at alternatives or to criticise the existing ecclesial order will be stifled:

It is as though the Church is stuck in a time warp and the allegiance it yielded from so many in the past is now obliterated and leaves the Church as an institution here facing the gravest of crises. If any individual Bishop or priest tries to go against the system and voice their frustration and the need for a fundamental overhaul of how the Church functions, they will feel the cold wind from the rest of the hierarchy and from Rome.

McGuinness echoes this view and is convinced that at the root of the disillusionment that exists within the Church today is an overwhelming sense of powerlessness felt by people when it comes to effecting change. McGuinness argues that the institutional Church here is essentially drifting in the direction orchestrated by Rome and is oblivious to the boundless energy and vision of its people. The real problem, she contests, is that people are not encouraged to bring their critical and imaginative faculties to bear on the Church and matters of real ecclesial importance become the privileged remit of those in authority: “Anyone who tries to break the mould is ostracised. The Parish councils are too safe, comprised of people who support the established norms rather than challenge them.” McGuinness believes that the Church Institution risks being left behind by a people in search of something more authentic and meaningful:

The institutional Church has lost its way. The response to the whole abuse scandal shows the extent to which the Church is far removed from the people and from the carpenter in Nazareth. The people are beginning to realise that the hierarchy does not have a monopoly on the faith and that they too have a say in Church matters.

O’ Halloran maintains that measures taken by the hierarchy to involve the people in the governance of their local parish community serve to consolidate the current ecclesial structures rather than distribute real authority and power to the people. O’ Halloran argues that the powers attributed to the people in parish councils are largely ineffective given that their decisions can ultimately be vetoed by those in authority beyond the council: “They do not represent a real and assured way of giving a voice to those on the margins but serve only to give the impression that their opinion counts. The status quo remains the same.” O’ Halloran is adamant that real ecclesial reform necessitates a new climate of dialogue between the leadership and the people so that collectively they can delineate a new direction for the Church in Ireland and transform it from within: “It is important to hold things together and to keep dialogue open with everyone. Cutting yourself off from the system and going outside it in an attempt to redeem it is not the answer.” O’ Halloran is convinced that a time of renewal and change can happen if those at the base of the current pyramid of power bring their energies and their vision to bear on the life of the Church:

Real authentic renewal comes from the bottom up, from the grassroots. The initiative must come from the people. It can only come this way. It is they who must envisage a new way forward and

persevere in their pursuit of change in the hope that their leaders will recognise the opportunities that this time presents.

It is clear that O' Halloran advocates a radical reversal in how the Church has traditionally operated here and believes that the initiative for this change must come from the grassroots of the prevailing structures if it is to be effective. McVerry, in contrast, argues that within the current dynamic of Church change is not possible and that all efforts to promote reform "from the inside" will ultimately be subdued by the internal dynamics of a system that clings obstinately to the established structures of authority. McVerry believes that change can only happen when people step outside the constraints of the prevailing structures of Church and form smaller, more inclusive communities of faith that more accurately reflect the humanity and vision of the early Church. McVerry is aware of the decisive shift in mindset that this necessitates if the Church here is to be liberated by its people: "The hierarchy is an integral part of the Church but it is not the entirety of it. If the momentum for change is not going to come from those in power, the stimulus for this change must come from outside the parameters of the existing system." This gets to the kernel of McVerry's appraisal of the shortcomings of the existing dynamic of Church in Ireland. A model of Church that imposes rules and regulations from the top down effectively binds the people on the lower tiers to a system that they are powerless to change. Within this framework, the people's voice is silenced and their capacity to bring about decisive change in the Church remains aspirational:

I cannot see anyone challenging the system and withstanding the wrath that they would inevitably have to endure. I would love to see all the Bishops resign on mass so that the Church here could make a statement and start afresh. Without an extraordinary gesture like this, the Church as we know it will only sink deeper into the mire. The people need to take on the mantle and allow hope must emerge from the sidelines.

Power and Quinn are both lay activists who articulate the profound sense of alienation felt by many women in the Church in Ireland today. Power believes that the Church in Ireland needs to restore its credibility and give hope to countless women who remain committed to their Christian faith but anonymous in a system that ensnares rather than liberates their true potential. Power articulates her sense of exclusion within the current paradigm of Church: "I find it difficult now to participate in the official liturgy of the Church because as a woman I am using male language, ascribing to a male theology, participating in a male

understanding of liturgy and praying to a male understanding of God.” Power argues that most women live with a bewildering sense of frustration at the task of promoting reform within an institution that effectively imposes its own limits on the scope of this reform: “There’s a sense that as a lay person I can only do something in my parish once I have the priest’s permission and more than that I can’t suggest change because any and all change must come from an ordained source.” Power traces the sense of estrangement she now feels within the Church to an experience she had as an adult altar server in the Pro Cathedral a number of years ago: “I had studied theology to MA level and wanted to engage with liturgy in a new way. During the Chrism Mass over Easter I was struck very suddenly by the absolute exclusion of women when many of the priests of the diocese came onto the altar to renew their vows.” Power believes that the Church has strayed significantly from its source and has become something that it was never intended to be: “Jesus never spoke of structures, power and roles – he led by example and the Church today has strayed far from this example.” Power speaks of a new resolve that is palpable in women today to no longer passively surrender to the oppressive boundaries that they are expected to adhere to but to play a transforming role in the life of the Church:

I see women in very empowering roles at the margins of the Church and also outside of it. They are empowering themselves and one another. Women over the centuries have made significant contributions to health care, education, justice and advocacy work – many of them religious sisters. Nowadays, women are following their call into similar work without the need to take religious vows. Many are well-educated in theology and bring huge ability and vision. Some are accepted by Church structures, some are not.

Quinn’s observations offer an insight into the dilemma that increasing numbers of Catholics here have had to confront in recent years. Quinn explains how those who have become sidelined on the margins of the Church can choose to either walk away from an institution that appears implacably opposed to change or stay and transform the present ecclesial order from within: “I find myself caught between conflicting currents; one drawing me away from an institution that seems fundamentally biased against women, the other compelling me to channel my energies into encouraging other lay women and men to become a force for change in the Church.” Quinn reveals that she is part of a team of lay ‘volunteers’ in her local parish that organise workshops on spirituality and social justice to support people in their faith development and to give impetus to a new dynamic within

their parish community: “Gradually people are beginning to find their voice and they are being listened to. I detect a new openness to change among the clergy in the parish who work alongside us in our pursuit of change. We can begin to glimpse the style of Church that we all want to belong to.” Quinn reflects on the vision of Church that she anticipates for her 3 year old daughter when the process of ecclesial reform which she believes is slowly gathering pace comes to fruition: “I want her to reconcile her place in the Church and her being a woman, to know that she is valued, that her views matter, and that she can be part of a prayerful decision making community inspired by bishops, priest and other lay people.” Quinn argues that the reticence of the hierarchy to promote a more inclusive style of Church not only consigns the majority of its members to the periphery but essentially disconnects the dynamic of Church from the source of its renewal:

As a woman it has become very painfully clear to me that women are alienated within the current model of Church in Ireland today. We are alienated because we have to live with this dissonance; this ‘irrationality’, this sense deep down that something isn’t quite right. We are also alienated because we often feel ‘alien’. We have no power (of course, many priests would argue they have little power either), we have no influence; we can feel as if we are there to make up the numbers, and to serve in whatever way we can and are let.

Noonan and Ryan believe that the Church here can draw inspiration from the unique dynamism of grassroots Christian communities around the world. Ryan underlines the vivifying impact women have had on the Church in Brazil and how they have ignited a new defiance among the poor to liberate themselves from their oppression: “My faith has been empowered by this new force in the Church. In many instances, women are real liberators, transforming their communities with their service of love.” Noonan recalls the enthusiasm and drive of the co-ordinators that animated these communities and acclaims their contribution in breathing new life into the mission of the Church across Latin America:

After my years in Brazil, I am heartened and privileged to have seen so many coordinators who are able to effect change and help their people to realise God walks alongside them in their struggle for justice. The co-ordinators are the powerhouse of these communities, organising liturgy, allocating responsibility to others in areas of education and service and lead by example in all that they do. They herald a new day of opportunity for the global Church.

Ryan believes that the future of the Church here will be defined by the creative energy of people on the periphery of the existing structures: “The people need to have their say and re-orientate the Church here in a new direction. The impetus for change has to come from the margins.” Noonan reveals how these communities draw their sustenance from the Gospel in their efforts to bring the liberating power of the Word to bear on their lives: “The Gospel becomes the fulcrum of each community, and their liberating praxis becomes the means through which the people become architects of a new social order that reflects their needs and rights.” Noonan believes that the Gospel can become “a vehicle of liberation” for people here and provide the stimulus for a more participatory and more compassionate style of Church to emerge in Ireland: “In Brazil, the Church and the people were effectively one, working towards a new social order that protected the rights and self worth of the poor and their aspirations for a more just society.”

Noonan argues that the apparent crisis in vocations in Ireland creates an opening for the people here to become “ecclesial subjects” in their own right and exercise greater responsibility in the life of the Church: “Just like in Brazil, it can no longer be presumed that each parish in Ireland will have a resident ordained minister. Lay ministry returns the Church to its people and helps them to infuse the old, established order with a whole new energy.” Noonan remains somewhat sceptical of the rationale behind the many new pastoral initiatives orchestrated by the hierarchy here aimed at encouraging the laity to play a more active role in the life of their local parish community: “Some see the current crisis as the work of the Spirit calling lay people to ministry. The problem with this view is the implication that if there were enough priests then the services of the laity would not be necessary.” Noonan welcomes the aspiration of the Irish Episcopal Conference (2010) to open up a dialogue “with those who are committed, with those who are interested, with those who are alienated” as a necessary first step in the hierarchy recognising the need to reach out to those on the fringes of the Church and empower the people to become protagonists in the task of shaping a new future for the Church here (Irish Bishops, 2010:14). Ryan, however, argues that this process is “merely cosmetic” unless the people are afforded their legitimate right to participate in the governance of the Church: “Discernment must lead to action. It is futile giving a voice to the people if their perceptions and aspirations are not acted on. The Church needs to become revitalised by the creative energy of its people. The alternative will ultimately condemn the Church as we now know it to history.” Ryan cites Irene Ní Mháille to reinforce her conviction that this

“quantum leap” for the Church must be viewed not solely as an administrative need but as a theological right:

If we, the laity, are part of the Church, then something that affects our faith – the most intimate part of our lives – should not take place without our knowing about it and without our having a chance to discuss its appropriateness for us. Otherwise, it is obvious to us laity that you are only playing games with the notion of Church as ‘people of God’. (Ní Mháille, 2003:279)

Doyle questions whether his experience of Church in Brazil under the guardianship of Archbishop Dom Helder Camara could ever be replicated here given that the hierarchy have become so far removed from the real and pressing concerns of the people: “The Church is propelled forward by people who are reluctant to relinquish their grip on power and address the needs of those they purport to serve.” Unlike Noonan and Ryan, Doyle’s enduring impression of his experience of the Church in Latin America leaves him dismayed that forces within the internal dynamics of power in the Church will ultimately render any effort to promote change obsolete: “The ideal of what the Church could become was glimpsed all too fleetingly. The promise of a new Church revitalised from the base upwards remains unrealised.” Doyle argues that the sense of betrayal felt by committed Christians here in the wake of the clerical abuse scandal parallels the disillusionment experienced by the poor across Latin America when the bishops who once championed their rights and their needs so selflessly were replaced as part of a “intentional strategy by Rome to quell the dynamism that was palpable in the grassroots Church.” Doyle reveals how the support these communities received from the hierarchy has waned significantly since their inception and reflects a deeper obstinacy on the part of Church leaders the world over in recent decades to place the preservation of the existing ecclesial norms above service of the voiceless and the marginalised in the world today:

There was a mechanism in place that worked. The co-ordinators learned from the pastoral agents and empowered their people in the process. That vital tie with the universal Church has weakened. Bishops that were instrumental in driving on these initiatives have been replaced by conservative Bishops more intent on preserving the current structures of power irrespective of the consequences.

Doyle argues that the damage that this has done is irreparable, and, against this backdrop, struggles to see how the process of renewal can be advanced in Ireland today: “The hierarchy is suffocating the life blood from the people and silencing their legitimate voice.

Protecting the institution at all costs seems to be the mantra and people are turning away in their droves.” Doyle insists that the grassroots Christian communities that he experienced in Brazil contain within themselves what is fundamental to the identity of the universal Church and hopes one day that new leaders will emerge “like Dom Helder” that will realign the movement of the Church with the needs of oppressed communities throughout the world:

The Church must venture outside its traditional walls to those suffering on the margins and discover in their humanity the life force it needs to move forward. Protecting the institution must give way to protecting the needs of the vulnerable in society.

Byrne questions the authenticity of a Church institution that elevates itself above the daily struggles of its people and is “cushioned” from the raw destitution and pain endured by many on the fringes of society in Ireland today. For him, the Church is so embedded in its rituals, traditions and pastoral practice, that it fails to recognise the ongoing revelation of its source in the suffering and persecution of its people: “To better know the God of Jesus, we must empty ourselves and make the joys and pains, the life and death of the oppressed our destiny” (Byrne, 2009:6). Byrne asks; when has the Church listened to the poor, to their stories, their perspective, their vision, their wisdom? He is convinced that “the truths that lie in the stories of the people are a much better Gospel than the jaded, rusty expressions that permeate our liturgies and our rituals.” Byrne is in no doubt that the time for change and transformation has arrived and that the Church here needs to be a more humble one, centred on service and not power:

When has the Church been humble enough to reflect Jesus’ self-emptying and let go of the vestiges of power that it clings on to? The poor need support from within, from people that share their plight, that know the rigours of their daily lives and glimpse the spirit that lies within. Only then will the message have the stamp of authenticity.

Byrne argues that the Church as we know it is dismantling before our eyes and is being replaced by something radically different to what has preceded it. Byrne believes that people are withdrawing their allegiance to the “old order” in favour of a more liberating way of being Church where people come to encounter God more directly through their solidarity with those who are most impoverished in their midst: “The praxis of solidarity makes us human in communion, and draws us into the contemplative practice of God’s compassionate gaze, revealed to us in very ordinary and often uncomfortable engagements

with the suffering” (Byrne, 2009:7). Byrne believes that closeness to the poor will bring the Church back to where it belongs, and, in the process, help the Church to re-discover a profound new sense of the mystery of God. God speaks through the poor, he maintains, and it is through the weak and the fragile that God has chosen to be part of the history of humanity: “What stretches my heart is a God situation that has arisen with the poor. There is a vitality and a depth to these experiences that you won’t find in safe places.” Byrne believes that the renaissance of the Church will only happen when all that has impeded the Church from remaining true to its core purpose is finally relinquished:

We are staring at the abyss, at chaos and the people who value their faith will eventually rise up and form something new, more vibrant and more inclusive of all. A lot of what is there now must be shed, must die before we move on. The Church must undergo its own ‘chrysalis’, for only in the shedding of the old can freedom and newness be truly discovered.

5.2.2 A Model of Christian Community that Gives a Voice to People on the Margins

Dorr argues that the momentum for change is slowly gathering on the fringes of the Church and that a once subservient people are no longer prepared to acquiesce to the established norms in the Church. Dorr acclaims the new “critical spirit” that is palpable among increasing numbers of Christians in Ireland today who are beginning to engage in the task of re-aligning the Church with the vision and humanity of its source: “‘Ordinary’ Christians are not being faithful to the gospel if they do not expect- and even demand- that Church ministers and authorities consult with them and enable them to be actively involved in shaping and carrying out the mission of the church” (Dorr, 2004:203). Dorr contends that a new impetus must come from the world of the faithful; it is they who can turn the Church outwards and make it become more keenly aware of its responsibilities in the world: “Talking about change with a focus only on what is happening inside the Church is a mistake. The real energy and possibilities are found outside the walls of the existing structures in the Church.” Dorr alludes to the energy and enthusiasm palpable in the many aid organisations and ecological groups that are raising a new consciousness among people of the pressing challenges facing civilisation in our time. Dorr is in no doubt that whilst these groups and communities may not be explicitly religious in their motivation, their concern and compassion draws them close to God:

They may be disenchanted with the way they see Christianity being lived out around them, but they have not given up the search for a system of belief and spiritual practice which affirms and nourishes their own spiritual experiences. (Dorr, 2004:208)

McGuinness sees evidence of a new hope slowly “erupting” on the periphery of the Church in the increasing numbers of community groups that give primacy to the needs of those who are most vulnerable and voiceless in society. McGuinness argues that whilst many people have severed their ties with the institutional Church, clusters of communities are emerging around the country comprised of Christians searching for an alternative model of Church that more accurately reflects the vision and ideals of the Gospel. McGuinness acclaims how ‘De Paul International’ has created a dynamic for lay volunteers to play a decisive role in bringing the Vincentian vision to life in ways that radiate hope into the lives of the marginalised in Ireland today. McGuinness detects a remarkable humanity in this group, an unflinching concern for the wellbeing of the poor and a willingness “to take risks on behalf of those who no one wants to work with.” Essentially, McGuinness believes that these communities signal a new way of being Church in Ireland today and underscore the importance of interpreting the Christian story in light of the appalling level of social deprivation that many in society the have to endure today:

Liberation is being felt in small clusters of communities around the country who are searching for something different. Christian reflection becomes the springboard to social action. These communities are founded on an acceptance that our growing awareness of the interconnectedness of all of life is futile unless we recognise the implications this has for the way we respond to the needs of those who are homeless, those who are oppressed or those who simply struggle to cope in our society.

McGuinness recognises the willingness of members of these communities to navigate a new, uncharted course and to reach out to embrace the burdens of the most vulnerable in Irish society. In her journal article ‘The Spirituality of the Saint Vincent de Paul Society’ (2010), Waller captures the distinctive appeal of Vincentian spirituality for a growing number of Christians in Ireland today: “We see the immense reserves of strength and courage in the poor. There is so much to admire in the way people endure and go on, despite adversity, and in the way they remain cheerful, loving, content despite suffering. These are all sacramental moments, signs of Christ’s presence in the world” (Waller,

2010:48-49). McGuinness maintains that these communities make a clear distinction between their abhorrence at the crimes of the Institutional Church and their unwavering faith in the enduring legacy of the vision of community that Jesus proposed for humanity:

We cannot sit back and lament the demise of something that, as recent reports have shown, was fundamentally flawed anyway. Equally, we cannot equate that Church with the Church that Jesus initiated. Jesus urges us to build a community that is radically open to everybody, especially those shunned by society.

O' Halloran contends that there are many disconnected faith sharing groups in Ireland that are invigorating the life of their local parish communities. O' Halloran believes that we are witnessing the gradual decline of the traditional "Church of services" and the emergence of a more compassionate "Church of service" mobilised by groups and organisations around the country that are discovering more meaningful ways of giving witness to the Gospel message. O' Halloran believes that these groups capture what is quintessential to the vision of Christian community promoted in the Gospel and signify a more authentic way of being Church in the world today: "The church is most obviously discernible in small Christian communities; in practice it is these that are at the cutting edge of testimony and action (O' Halloran, 2010:35). O' Halloran contends that these groups are not mere appendages to the traditional Church but are intrinsic to the identity of the Church and provide a powerful conduit between the people and God: "So we can know God through other people, for when we experience love from our fellow human beings, we are experiencing God. Now if we experience something, that is truly knowing. The best road towards knowing God is through living community" (O' Halloran, 2010:27). O' Halloran reflects on the unique appeal of these small Christian communities in Ireland today:

... they enjoy a new-found breathing space in the church and fight shy of being seized upon and dragooned by some over-zealous and ordered individual/organisation. Networking and structure have their place, yet these developments have to be organic and come from the grass-roots and, of course, never take precedence over relationships or deprive small Christian communities of their legitimate freedom. (O' Halloran, 2010:61)

McVerry cautions that autonomous communities existing in isolation from a wider movement of grassroots communities could struggle to provide their own internal support mechanisms to guide them through their evolution. The danger, he contends, is that if these

communities pursue their own course independently of each other, they simultaneously stifle any prospect of channelling their combined energies and resources to bring about real transformation in the Church in Ireland today: “I fear that it will be difficult for these communities to sustain their initial enthusiasm and drive when they find themselves progressively more alienated and fragmented.” Power, however, finds evidence of a growing number of support systems for small Christian communities here among established religious congregations who are searching for more meaningful ways of reaching out to marginalised people in Ireland today. Power believes that in the wake of the clerical abuse scandal, many Christian congregations have experienced for themselves the ignominy of living on the margins of society and have begun to re-interpret their mission in light of the anguish and suffering they have endured over the past decade: “Many of these religious orders now know what it is like to be ostracized in society. The many have suffering for the heinous crimes of the few. In many instances, these orders are re-claiming the vision of their founders and anticipating new ways of empowering those on the fringes of society.” Power explains how the Christian Brothers are now committed to engaging in a “collaborative, culturally sensitive and co-ordinated way” to create communities of faith that address the real needs of the marginalised around the world. Each of these communities, she explains, has a support network, or ‘hub’, that comprises of a team of Brothers who support the members of the new communities and are listening to local people to discover current urgent needs before they initiate a series of activities to address those needs: “I believe that the Brothers have discovered their real identity by opening their lives up to the unique spirit of the people on the margins just as their founder did. The poor have become the source of their liberation.” Dorr draws a clear distinction between the way the rigidity of the institutional model of Church and the dynamism of religious congregations who are defined by their efforts to create support structures to empower the voiceless in their pursuit of justice:

Many religious congregations and missionary institutes have moved much further than the hierarchical church in developing a new practice and spirituality of authority and leadership... As they have come more into solidarity with those who are victims of marginalisation, discrimination or oppression in society, they have become more aware of the dangers of the abuse of power. (Dorr, 2006:38)

Power believes that in an increasingly individualistic era, authentic community is needed to mobilise people here to draw on their reserves of compassion and effect real change in Irish society today. Power insists that each faith community must create an environment where dialogue and inquiry between people in their search for truth and spiritual sustenance paves the way for new levels of engagement in the Church's mission in the world: "Solidarity implies that we are open and honest with one another, accepting and supportive, vulnerable and compassionate, fully human, in conversation." Power explains how her involvement with 'The Edmund Rice Network' has facilitated a new chapter in her own spiritual journey that has enabled her to see the possibilities that exist outside the traditional boundaries of Church. Power reflects on the enduring appeal of the paradigm of Church promoted within the Edmund Rice Network:

We discuss and explore together, rather than listen to instruction or lectures. We explore different approaches to prayer and ritual rather than feel bound by rubrics or convention. We speak a language that is new and refreshing. I feel accepted by them, seen and valued, no matter what my views or struggles are. I am constantly 'called forth' by them; invited to engage in projects that challenge and stretch me to reach out to those in need.

McVerry insists that Christians here must discover in the humanity and spirit of the marginalised in society the core values needed to sustain them in their search enlightenment. McVerry argues that small Christian communities must provide a space for people to live in accordance with values that are stifled rather than encouraged in the wider social world. Life in Ireland today, he suggests, pulls people in a direction that is diametrically opposed to finding fulfillment and security and building community is the antidote to the deep rooted malaise that lies at the heart of modern society here. McVerry is aware of how easy it is to become submerged in the materialism of our society and remain oblivious to the needs of those whose plight can so easily be ignored. McVerry maintains that these communities must provide a counter current to the dominant societal norms and create the conditions for the people on the margins to become a potent force for change in Irish society:

Building a strong sense of community, a community that has the self-confidence to reach out and welcome into their midst the stranger, the immigrant and those on the margins, building a strong sense of solidarity with one another, is the direction in which we can seek to fill the vacuum created by the values that today's culture imposes on us. (McVerry, 2006:75)

Byrne believes that the future of the Church in Ireland rests decisively in the hands of groups and communities that are already leaving their imprint on the style of Church that they want to belong to. Byrne believes that the Church is being re-invented on the fringes of Irish society as people here are creating their own dynamic of Christian community that enables them to inject a new confidence and optimism into their surroundings: “Today, something more than the Church is required, something that is rooted in, and supported by, those informed and inspired members of a local community who are prepared to put time and energy into building a better future for its members” (Byrne, 2008:101). Unless the people are at the heart of the Church, he insists, the Church severs its connection with its source and contradicts everything that it is meant to be: “Christian mysticism impels one towards active outward community engagement rather than to focus on the purely passive and inward life... we must look towards the lived practice, the provocative presence and the gritty praxis of individuals within community” (Byrne, 2009:23). Byrne believes that small Christian communities founded on their compassion for the poor echo the empathy and compassion Jesus had for those who were on the margins: “The preference of Christ was not to lecture, condemn or judge those who erred, but to sit alongside them, share a meal with them, listen to them and try to give hope and encouragement to those who felt excluded.” Byrne insists that small Christian communities cannot afford to remain impartial to the plight of those in need in Irish society but must embrace their vulnerability and brokenness as Jesus did and encourage them to become participants in a new social order that reflects their rights and aspirations:

I see the Church in the poor and the bruised, in sharing bread with the needy, in finding time for quiet chats and words of support and encouragement among those on the margins. Before the Church rises, it must first share in the suffering of those it has let down. We must wash their feet, become a servant Church, before we can be free to talk about what must follow next.

5.3 Theme 2: An Irish Perspective on Base Christian Community

The primary interest throughout this theme is to examine how small Christian communities here adapt the paradigm of Base Christian Community to an Irish setting. Figure 5.2 (p.230) illustrates how each section in Theme 2 follows the same pattern, clarifying the theological basis to each defining feature of a small Christian community and then illustrating how this theology translates into practice. Section 5.3.1 (pp.231-235) examines

how each small Christian community is part of a wider network of communities that combine to provide a powerful conduit for the Spirit to reverberate through the activity of the Church in Ireland today. This section explores the emerging dynamism of the ‘Parish Cell System of Evangelisation’ and establishes how each community is autonomous yet part a wider diocesan support network that breathes new life into each local parish faith community. The contribution of members of small Christian communities in Ireland provides a probing appraisal of the appeal of this emerging dynamic of Church for increasing numbers of people in Ireland today. Bridie Clancy and Claire Cassells are members of ‘Leixlip Parish Cell Community’ which is part of a national network of over 150 cells. Their observations capture how each cell exists within the wider movement of cells that combine to invigorate the activity of the Church in their local parish communities throughout the country.

Section 5.3.2 (pp.236-243) highlights the need to initiate programmes that equip the people on the fringes of society with the skills and education necessary to empower them to exert greater control over their own destiny and reveals how ‘ATD Fourth World’ and ‘Partners in Faith’ indicate ways in which this can be achieved. Mary O’ Dwyer and Dave Donnellan from ‘Partners in Faith’ in Dublin are actively involved in promoting initiatives that challenge people on the margins of society here to become protagonists in their own history. ‘Partners in Faith’ was set up in 1985 by Ciaran Earley and Gemma McKenna to empower the poor in Ireland and to equip them with the skills and training required to enable them to play an active role in creating more just and equitable social conditions for their communities. Françoise Barbier is a member ‘ATD Fourth World’, a social justice movement dedicated to protecting the needs of impoverished people in more than 100 countries worldwide. ‘ATD Fourth World’ was founded by Joseph Wresinski, a priest of Polish origin who spent much of his life living among the poor in an emergency housing camp in Noisy-le Grand, near Paris. (See Chapter 4, pp.159, 162 and 165). Barbier gives a uniquely Irish perspective to the work of ‘ATD Fourth World’ and underlines the urgency of the need for social justice in Irish society today. This section establishes how the identity of each small Christian community is defined by its solidarity with the voiceless and the oppressed on the margins of society.

Section 5.3.3 (pp.244-248) examines the centrality of the Gospel to the life of ‘The Fig Tree Small Christian Community’ in Fatima Mansions in Dublin and reflects on the

unique dynamics of the scriptural reflection promoted in Base Christian Communities. The 'Fig Tree Small Christian Community' in Fatima Mansions, Dublin have been meeting once a week for 28 years and their longevity is testimony to the solidarity and trust that is palpable within the group to this day. The interviews with three of its members, Gemma McKenna, Yvonne Daly and Mary McQuaide along with the experience of spending time with the community has helped to provide a necessary framework against which the core themes that are central to this chapter can be measured and elucidated. The overriding interest in this section is to explore how members of small Christian communities draw their inspiration from the Gospel and discover innovative ways of translating the Word into the immediacy of their everyday experiences.

Section 5.3.4 (pp.248-253) examines how small Christian communities become a springboard for social action, and, through their solidarity with those most alienated and forgotten in their midst, become more susceptible to the potency of God's love. Gemma Peelo and Delores Connell were members of a small Christian community in Crumlin, Dublin for over 10 years. Their reflections provide a penetrating insight into how their small Christian community created the conditions for their members to channel their collective gifts and talents in the promotion of the kingdom. In exploring the distinctive dynamics of 'The Crumlin Small Christian Community', this section illustrates how small Christian communities become a potent force for change in their midst and contribute towards the advancement of the kingdom in the immediacy of their time and place.

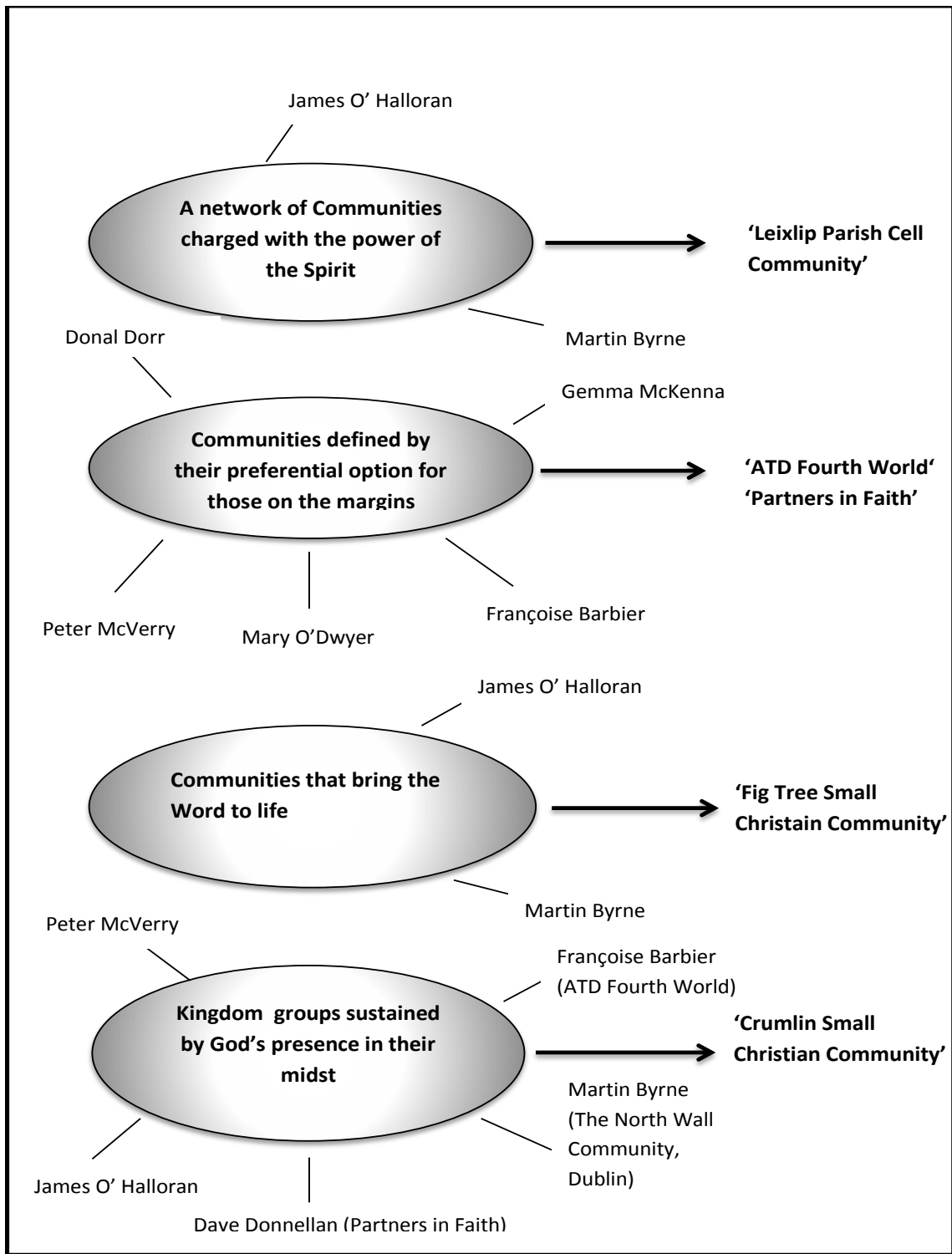


Figure 5.2 An Irish perspective on the defining elements of a Base Christian Community

5.3.1 A Network of Communities Charged with the Power of the Spirit

O Halloran believes that the dynamism of small Christian communities is giving a whole new impetus to the Church's mission in the world. The genesis of this movement towards a more inclusive and more compassionate Church may be in Latin America, he explains, but its impact is reverberating far and wide in over 200,000 communities throughout the world. O' Halloran contends that the hallmark of these communities is their essential interconnectedness; they are not isolated movements, totally detached from each other, but mutually enriching communities that are open to each other and "float together" at key times to celebrate what they have in common. O' Halloran underlines how these communities exist independently of each other yet combine to form a universal network of communities that mirror the unique dynamism of the early Christian churches: "Small Christian communities, though having their own relative autonomy, ought to be open to one another and can combine in a parish or wherever so as to form a communion of communities" (O' Halloran, 2010:17). In his book, *Living Cells: Vision and Practicalities of Small Christian Communities and Groups* (2010), O' Halloran reveals how each small Christian community is animated by the life force of the Spirit and creates a powerful channel between humanity and God that has the potential to invigorate the activity of the Church in the world today:

Finally, and most importantly, we must pray fervently for these small communities, this nascent church, which is such a splendid example of the Holy Spirit working in the people of God, which has so rapidly become one of the most powerful forms of Christian witness in the post-Vatican II era and which has so much to offer our brothers and sisters, our church and our Lord. (O' Halloran, 2010:192)

O' Halloran believes that small Christian communities are subject to the same unifying force that governs each strand of the Trinity and capture within their own dynamic something of the creative current that underpins all of creation. O' Halloran recalls how the Greeks in the early Church used the word 'choreuein' (to dance) in an effort to capture how the persons of the Trinity related to one another. What distinguishes the small Christian communities, he contends, is that they too are woven together into an indivisible union and that their choreography is very much sealed by the same life force that underscores the essential synergy between the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit; namely, the unrelenting power of God's love: "As a corollary of being motivated by the Trinity, the

communities have a refined sense of being permeated by the love of God” (O’ Halloran, 2010:55). O’ Halloran reveals how each part or each community, like each component of the Trinity, has its own uniqueness and its own autonomy yet is inseparable to the rest. These communities may be spread around the world, may reflect the varied idiosyncrasies of their cultural and social world, yet they are all charged with a palpable sense that God is present among them. Essentially, the power of God’s love is the vital strand that is woven seamlessly through these communities, binding them together in a way that reflects the intangible union of the Trinity. O’ Halloran argues that the myriad of small Christian communities coalesce into one powerful movement that provides a vital artery for the liberating power of the Spirit to enter history: “In the small Christian communities around the world one detects the same sensitivity and mode of operation. Spirit-consciousness is extraordinarily high. The Spirit is the vitality between Father and Son and activates the Trinitarian love among peoples” (O’ Halloran, 2010:57). O’ Halloran is convinced that small Christian communities provide a more effective and meaningful way of transmitting God’s presence in the world:

The church, therefore, is a sacrament of Christ. We can no longer see him in the flesh but we can see him in the community. So the church makes Christ present in the world. Indeed as a community of brothers and sisters, who through their loving and sharing become one, it makes the Trinity present. And it is the church, activated of course by the Spirit, that must now carry on Christ’s work of community-building, striving to reconcile us to God, ourselves, neighbour and environment. (O’ Halloran, 2010:16-17)

Whilst it is commonly accepted that there is universal blueprint for small Christian communities that is applicable to the idiosyncrasies and needs unique to each community, it is nevertheless helpful to establish how each community exists within a wider movement of small faith communities that can bring renewed impetus to the activity of the Church in Ireland. Cassells and Clancy have been actively involved in their ‘Leixlip Parish Cell Community’ for over a decade now and they both recognise the importance of stepping outside the traditional boundaries of Church and exploring new ways of nourishing their faith. Clancy clarifies the appeal of this new model of Church for growing numbers of people in Ireland today: “The institution recedes into the background and something more meaningful and more representative of the people is being born. Each person within each cell has their own intrinsic value and each cell in turn reaches out beyond itself to

rejuvenate the parish.” Clancy traces the emergence of this model of Church in Ireland to 1990 when Michael Hurley returned from a ‘Cell Seminar’ in Rome and explored ways in which this concept could be adapted to Ireland: “Michael recognised that the Church as an institution needed to provide a network of support for grassroots faith communities in Ireland and he had the vision to see that the traditional ways of the past had to give way to something more participatory and more spiritual.” Clancy reveals that there are now 14 cells in their parish community and there are 40 parishes around the country that have embraced this new paradigm of Christian community:

All 8 members of our cell are intrinsic to the life of our community which, in turn, is an integral part of the wider movement of cells in Ireland and beyond. We remain autonomous yet connected to an evolving dynamism that has now “multiplied” to over 150 cells across the country.

Clancy argues that the growing appeal of the Parish Cell Community is indicative of a growing demand for change in how the Church has traditionally operated in Ireland and signals that a new reciprocal alliance between the institutional Church and grassroots communities is possible. Clancy explains how the identity of each community revolves around “the oikos philosophy of evangelisation” which is grounded on the conviction that “everyday relationships, and the ongoing interactions that constitute these relationships, are extremely significant in the process of passing on the faith.” Clancy explains how each cell affords every member the opportunity to play their part in the life of their community and the collective spiritual energy being generating in these cells radiates out into their wider parish community. Representatives from each cell meet as a diocesan group every 3 months to share resources, to reflect on their experiences of the Parish Cell System and to envisage ways of promoting this model of Church in their wider social community. The diocese in turn organises a seminar each year for members of each of the cells to attend. Clancy believes that this synergy between the grassroots cells and the wider Church community is central to the evolution of this dynamic of Church in Ireland today:

Our parish cell is indicative of a new creative alliance between the people and the institutional Church. Both co-exist and derive their sustenance from each other. The Church is back in the hands of the people and each cell discovers within its members the strength and enlightenment needed to direct it forward.

Cassells reveals that there is a clear consensus among members of their Parish Cell Community that the rituals and practises of the established Church no longer resonate with the realities of their everyday lives and that they are searching for a more intimate and a more vibrant way of being Church than what they experience in their regular parish liturgies. The meetings give primacy to prayerful reflection on a specific Gospel passage that is supported by a 'teaching' from one of their clergy recorded in advance of each meeting and distributed to each cell. Cassells sheds light on the unique appeal of this new ecclesial dynamic: "We come together to listen to each other and enlighten each other in response to the inspiration we draw from the world of scripture. Our experience of Christian community draws us deeper into the all encompassing mystery of God's love and the myriad of ways in which this love is revealed in our lives." Cassells and Clancy had differing views on this feature of their meetings. For Clancy, it was a vital link with the wider parish community and opened the group up to the wisdom of the Church. Cassells, however, argued that she would like to see someone from within the cell preparing and presenting this 'teaching'. She maintains that the cell system needs to give primacy to the voice of each member and break free from the mindset of the hierarchical system. Cassell's observations on her reasons for choosing to be part of her small community are particularly revealing:

In the past, faith was about observing rituals, participating in something that held very little meaning. My experience of Church seemed to obscure rather than reveal God's presence in my life, suppressing my spiritual impulse rather than liberating it. I needed to engage with God at a deeper level than what I discovered in my regular parish liturgies and my Parish Cell Group creates an environment where this becomes possible.

What is striking about these Parish Cell Communities is the importance attributed to the contribution that each member can make to the life of their community. Clancy clarifies how no one person has a monopoly of power or influence over the rest and the group and all members are encouraged to leave their own imprint in the style and ethos of the community: "Each member of our cell brings their own individualism and potentialities to bear on the life of their community and the dynamism that this creates spills out into our local parish community." Cassells captures the potential of each member of her Parish Cell Community to bring something unique and powerful to their group, and, through their reflections and insights, open the group up to the stirrings of the Spirit in their lives:

We support each other in quiet ways in times of need, we listen to each other and enlighten each other, we are all charged by the sense that the Spirit is very much alive and active in our lives and we try to spread this realisation through word and deed. Faith has become something exciting, something challenging and deeply personal to each one of us. The old ways give way to something new and for me there is no going back.

Cassells reflects on the enduring appeal of this experience of Church, and, citing from Hurley's book *Parish Cell Communities As Agents Of Renewal In The Catholic Church In Ireland* (2011), explains that parish cells "provide one setting of community for the authentic Christian interpretations of personal experiences and the development of a deeper and more reflected faith" (Hurley, 2011:237). Cassells reveals how each Parish Cell Community is not simply a meeting point for prayerful reflection but a springboard for Christian witness, empowering people to play their part in alleviating the suffering of others within and beyond the boundaries of their community: "In our meetings we have lovely, quiet, sometimes mystical, encounter bringing us closer to one another and to God. Our spiritual encounter compels us outwards so that we become instruments of God's love in the world." Byrne believes that the emergence of smaller, more intimate faith communities like the Parish Cell Communities facilitates a new departure for the Church in Ireland that enables the people to take ownership of their own faith development and to become attuned to the deeper, spiritual realm at the core of their existence: "Ordinary Christian people must reclaim and revalue their own experience, affirm the loving and active presence of the Holy Spirit in their own story, and then articulate their story as a paragraph in the story of God" (Byrne, 2008:94). Byrne reveals how these communities reconcile the activity of the Church institution with the ongoing movement of the Spirit as it is revealed in the everyday realities of the people:

I have become more convinced that holiness is no longer an elite characteristic of those schooled in spiritual direction, of those engaged in frequent sacramental practice or of those called to clerical or religious lifestyles. Rather it is the stuff of ordinary people challenging each other to be servants and disciples of human community living. (Byrne, 2008:102)

5.3.2 Communities Defined by their Preferential Option for Those on the Margins

Small Christian communities anchor spiritual reflection in the everyday realities of this world. There is an implicit understanding in these communities that humanity cannot remain immune to the great injustices of our time but must participate in creating a new social order that protects the needs of the weak and the vulnerable in society. This section raises an important question; what is it that distinguishes these communities from the many prayer groups that exist around the country? Dorr believes that small Christian communities have provided the stimulus for the evolution of a new style of Christian witness that accentuates the need to make God's love more keenly felt in the lives of the poor and the downtrodden. Dorr observes how these communities have become synonymous with a radical option for the poorest in society and an unflappable yearning to liberate those once forgotten and silenced from the clutches of great persecution and injustice: "A new spiritual awakening is happening that is slowly releasing a new vitality and optimism into the lives of those most bruised and scarred by the ravages of poverty." Dorr argues that these communities manifest their concern for the poor by embracing their brokenness and vulnerabilities and drawing them into the very heart of their dynamic. In his view, real empathy with the poor is forged not through occasional acts of mercy from the sidelines of their existence but through an unwavering commitment to share in their struggles:

It means taking a stand on the side of the poor. And to do this with authenticity and credibility one must come into *solidarity* with the poor. This means sharing their life in some degree- and not just by living a simple lifestyle but also by experiencing some of their vulnerability, and their sense of being powerless and on the margins. (Dorr, 2004:19)

McVerry maintains that in the wake of the growing economic uncertainties of recent times, a new poor is emerging here among people who are no longer bystanders to the ravages of poverty and injustice. More and more are beginning to experience the utter desolation of "living on the edge", he contends, not knowing how they can withstand the torment of an economic storm that shows little sign of abating: "It is as though more people understand now what it feels like to be on the margins, to be powerless over your own destiny, to be at the mercy of hostile forces that pay scant regard for your wellbeing." McVerry sees evidence of a new spirit of solidarity in Irish society today, a concern for the wellbeing of

others that has become more pronounced as people struggle to come to terms with the demands of austerity: “Solidarity, then, is a willingness to the suffering of others with a love that is prepared to see my life changed, even radically in order to bring change to those who suffer” (McVerry, 2008:83). The lure of material gain that has defined our culture is slowly dissipating, he suggests, and a new empathy is seeping through into the machinations of our society:

The more we reach out and support others in need, the more we leave the trappings of materialism and success behind and make time for the poor and the broken, the more we hear the cry of those who are lost in the world and help them to realise that they are not alone, then we begin to reveal God’s love to the world. This has to be the hallmark of any authentic Christian community.

Dorr believes that it is impossible to radiate a new hope into the lives of the poor without first sharing in a significant way in their experience of being mistreated, by-passed, or being left alienated in a society that treats them with contempt. Dorr argues that small Christian communities create an environment where it becomes possible to fully empathise with all that the poor have to endure: “Here, their story becomes integral to the life of the community. Their voice is no longer silenced and their needs and rights are no longer ignored. These communities afford the poor the dignity and the respect that they are denied in society.” Dorr believes that this enduring alliance between the small Christian community and the poor does not necessitate a radical upheaval in the lives of those previously shielded from their suffering. What is required, he suggests, is a readiness to relinquish the trappings of power and privilege so that members of these communities are free to engage fully with the poor through their struggles: “It is difficult to see how poor people can really trust us unless we share their life to some extent.” The closer the alliance between these communities and the poor, he suggests, the more they become energised by their common humanity. Indeed, Dorr insists that the real indicator of the intrinsic worth of any small Christian community inevitably lies in their ongoing compassion for those who are poor, or oppressed, or discriminated against, or sick, or old, or disadvantaged in body or mind, or left on the margins of society:

That means sharing their lives in some degree, and in this way nourishing the beautiful virtue of compassion—since the word ‘compassion’ means ‘suffering with’... It calls us to work to ensure that the structures of society are shaped to protect the rights and dignity of poor or marginalised people. (Dorr, 2004:38-39)

Barbier maintains that small Christian communities do not simply opt for the poor but become one with the poor and work with them to eradicate everything that is oppressive and unjust in their society. Barbier recognises in the Gospel an intrinsic challenge to vehemently oppose what is unacceptable and unjust in society: “Part of the macro blasphemy of our time is the reality that 1.3 billion human beings must live on less than a dollar a day and that 50 million persons will die of hunger this year.” During the interview, Barbier repeatedly alluded to how the current economic climate challenges our preconceptions about poverty. In the wake of the severe austerity measures that many families have to cope with, she suggests, a widening number of people fall into the poverty net in Ireland today. Interestingly, the ‘Shaping Ireland’s Future’ Report (2012) commissioned by Social Justice Ireland reiterates Barbier’s emphasis on the numbers of people living in poverty in Ireland at this time. The report highlights the growing disparity between rich and poor in Irish society, revealing that the poorest 10% of households here have an average disposable income of E210 a week, compared to an average of E2,276 a week for the richest 10%. (Social Justice Ireland, 2012:81). One of the shocking social statistics in the report is the upsurge in numbers of children living in poverty:

Of all the children (under 18 years of age) in Ireland, 19.5% live in poverty – more than 200,000 children. The scale of this statistic, which has increased in recent years, is alarming. Given that our children are our future, this situation is not acceptable... Addressing child poverty must be a priority. (Social Justice Ireland, 2012:45)

Barbier appeals to members of small Christian communities to look for the poor in their midst, listen to them and allow themselves to be transformed by them. Barbier maintains that small Christian communities effectively provide a sanctuary for the poor that sustains them through their persecution and helps them to see beyond the harshness of their current existence. Communities like ‘ATD Fourth World’, she explains, are compelled to abandon their allegiance to the privileges of this world if they are to fully partake in the story of the poor and unleash a new hope and optimism into their lives. Walking alongside the poor in their pursuit of freedom and justice does not happen effortlessly, she insists, but requires an unequivocal commitment to serving the poor and elevating their status in the world:

Struggling by ourselves contradicts the Gospel. The truth can be held only in common, experienced together around Christ. And the truth is that if the rich do not share their possessions, love, intelligence and

lives in unison, then the poor, the wretched and the rich will never unite to build a world of justice and brotherhood.

Barbier believes that small Christian communities must become places where solidarity with those who are persecuted and impoverished becomes possible. To be Christian, she insists, involves living among the poor and experiencing for ourselves the conditions that they have to contend with in life. We do not know of any society, she asserts, where giving priority to the poorest has been tried so we must simply “advance step by step, groping our way along until we reach our intended destination.” We have covered mud floors in some of their homes, she explains, installed water and electricity, opened centres of learning, built kindergartens and family centres in our endeavour to give of ourselves for those who are deprived of their most basic rights in our society. Together, with the poor, they are forging an enduring alliance built on friendship and solidarity and together they are beginning to glimpse the promise of the liberation that is to come:

Solidarity is a radical commitment to do whatever is required to alleviate the sufferings of others. Entering into the world of their pain and suffering, our lives become charged with a love that can transform us and lead us unswervingly down the path of liberation.

O’ Dwyer argues that small Christian communities need to embrace the burdens of those who are weakest in society and empower them to take the necessary steps to overcome their impoverishment. O’ Dwyer alludes to a deeper vulnerability and frailty that she has discovered in the poor and highlights the propensity of the poor to believe that they are in some way responsible for the suffering and discrimination that they have to endure: “Destitution has prevented them from developing their intelligence and has dampened their self worth. They suffer deeply from feeling that they have not got the competency needed to succeed in this world.” O’ Dwyer believes that those who really contribute to the advancement of the poor must first persuade them that they are not responsible for a wretchedness inherited from history: “These communities must walk alongside the poor and to envisage possibilities for themselves far beyond what society has come to expect of them.” O’ Dwyer insists that it is incumbent on those committed to social justice to create a space where communal reflection becomes possible and where those less privileged in society are equipped with the skills and education necessary to further their own dreams and aspirations in life: “Empowering the poor and helping them to conquer their own fears and misgivings must take place alongside efforts to create more just and humane living

conditions for those overwhelmed by injustice and oppression.” O’ Dwyer is in no doubt that those who support the poor along the path of their liberation will themselves become free:

We need to forge a deep empathy with the poor and recognise in their brokenness the source of their infectious love. Our efforts to help the poor must place the destiny of their lives back in their hands. The poor release a new energy and strength in those who walk alongside them. What we give is returned in abundance.

McKenna, co-founder of ‘Partners in Faith’ with Ciaran Earley, echoes this view and argues that poverty is as much a mindset as it is a social condition and the poor need to be supported in their efforts to free themselves from all that stifles their progress in the world. Interestingly, McKenna avoids labelling these participants as “the poor” and prefers to see them as “people from communities where economic resources are limited.” McKenna argues that such labels serve to perpetuate the myth that those who are subjected to great poverty have no choice but to accept their fate and to think of themselves as society has conditioned them to. McKenna is aware that those living in situations of extreme destitution and hardship need to be supported in their efforts to free themselves from the oppressive social conditions that prevail in their communities:

The key to tackling injustice is to understand the structural causes of the destitution that many people in impoverished communities here have to contend with. This is an essential first step in the process of empowering those on the fringes of society to equip themselves with skills necessary to take decisive action so that they can overcome the debilitating social inequities that they and their communities have to endure.

McKenna recalls how both she and Earley met with representatives from many impoverished communities around Dublin in the late 1980s and conducted a series of workshops with them aimed at exploring issues relating to their personal and social development from a faith perspective: “The workshops sought to stimulate a new positivity in the participants that would spill back into their communities and create openings for people to come together to reflect, to pray and to support each other through the difficulties and hardships that they experienced.” When marginal groups have their experiences recognised, she asserts, it affirms their identity and their worth as a people and encourages them to reach out beyond their confines and play a more active role in society. McKenna is deeply aware that this process needs to be brought one step further; people

need to realise that they have the capacity to effect change and that they have resources within themselves to bring about real social transformation: “The objective is not to impose our own agenda on proceedings but to elicit from the participants ways they can release the transforming power of their energy and creativity into the life of their community.”

McKenna argues that the key to liberating those people who are living in great impoverishment lies in helping them to discover within themselves the potentialities and talents needed to transcend the misery of their conditions: “The challenge is to create the conditions in which people can tap into their own resources so that they can begin to discover for themselves what they can do to transform all that inhibits their true potential and worth in society.” Dorr clarifies the importance of facilitating a process that makes it possible for the poor to find their voice and to have their say in determining the course of all that happens in their lives:

The people who have been marginalised should be empowered to speak and act on their own behalf, so as to overcome their sense of helplessness. This means that those who have opted to be in solidarity with them often have to ‘hold back’. And when they do intervene it should be to encourage or facilitate the disadvantaged people themselves in articulating their own experience and in planning realistic action. (Dorr, 2000:156)

McKenna draws much of her inspiration from Freire and his efforts to promote a model of education that liberated the oppressed from the shackles of their history and that impelled them to become determining agents in their own destiny. (See Freire p.66, pp.88-89, p.111 and pp.123-124) Like Freire, McKenna believes that for “the truly humanist educator and the authentic revolutionary, the object of action is the reality to be transformed by them together with other people” (Freire, 1970:75). McKenna explains how the current training programme places a strong emphasis on social analysis; facilitating a process that enables the people to locate the structural causes of the social problems that they encounter in life and making them aware of possibilities beyond the existing norms. The analysis of society must be done by the participants themselves, she insists, if they are to penetrate through the layers of their oppressive existence and discover ways to redress all that is unacceptable and unjust: “The aim is to help them to discover their real needs, and to enable them to make their own decisions and initiate their own action.” Perhaps the most central principle of this “psycho-social method”, McKenna explains, is the conviction that

the agents of human development must be the people themselves, the “grassroots people” who are so frequently left powerless and voiceless in society. McKenna clarifies how promoting “problem-posing education” enables people to look at the situation they find themselves in with new eyes which serves as a necessary precondition for the transformative action that the participants themselves have ownership of. McKenna cites Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) to reinforce this point:

Problem-posing education bases itself on creativity and stimulates true reflection and action upon reality, thereby responding to the vocation of men (and women) as beings who are authentic only when engaged in inquiry and creative transformation. (Freire, 1970:56)

McKenna maintains that empowerment can take many different forms and very much reflects the idiosyncrasies and needs unique to each community. Indeed, McKenna underlines how, following these workshops, some participants have returned to their communities and mobilised the people to fight vociferously for a new development centre; some have highlighted the desolation of drug addiction that is rampant in their community and have orchestrated a protest against traffickers in their locality; some have campaigned to secure funding for libraries, adult education centres, leisure amenities and play areas for their children; all evidence of the potential of the people to exert a transforming influence on life of their community. Not every venture succeeds, McKenna reveals, and a vital component in the process is to allow scope for evaluation in the event of failure as well as success. Grappling with the specific obstacles that stifle progress leads to a more heightened awareness of root causes of the problem being addressed. McKenna recalls how one specific group had to overcome a series of disappointments before reaching their objective of acquiring the necessary funding for a new Adult Education Centre for their community:

Time and time again they met with failure. They sat down together, reflected on the latest barrier being placed in their way and identified the next course of action that would bring them closer to their goal. Their persistence was rewarded and their capacity to critically engage in the process in every step of its journey was instrumental in their success.

McKenna observes how each “generative theme”, once established and defined by the community, can give rise to a growing optimism and belief that collectively they can pool their energies to bring about real and enduring change in their communities. McKenna

explains how these issues are “generative” in that once people have met the demands of the first challenge that they have identified as a group and reached their goal, the process moves on to the next in a series of targets that need to be addressed by the community. In effect, each goal, once realised, leads naturally on to another related goal that the community aspires towards. The process is ongoing, McKenna explains, and the cumulative effect of accomplishing each task is that the people now become protagonists in their own history:

The workshops effectively serve as a springboard for social action and endeavour to re-fuel their belief in their capacity to make a difference. The process is mobilised by the people and culminates in a series of activities determined by the people themselves that lead to real social transformation.

Small Christian communities must become places where the resilience and dignity of a struggling people is acknowledged and respected. Each small Christian community is challenged to enter into solidarity with those who are most alienated and oppressed in society and support them in their efforts to liberate themselves from the stranglehold of poverty. Through this radical commitment to participating with the poor in their pursuit of justice, a small Christian community can send out an important signal to the rest of society and play a vital role in breaking down the barriers that inhibit the marginalised from playing an active role in society. Barbier believes that these communities signal the advent of a new era in civilisation, a time when the voice of those once silent becomes a catalyst for social transformation. Barbier alludes to the message engraved on the stone dedicated to their founder, Joseph Wresinski, at the ‘Plaza of Liberties and Human Rights’ in Paris to illustrate the importance of listening to those who are voiceless in society: “Wherever men and women are condemned to live in extreme poverty, human rights are violated. To come together to ensure that these rights be respected is our solemn duty.” Human misery recedes, she argues, wherever people unite to eradicate it. Indeed, Barbier maintains that those who listen cannot help being affected in their own flesh, in their own heart, by “these fallen people” and being moved to act decisively on their behalf:

People who have education and skills should learn from the have-nots. Those who have responsibilities and power should humble themselves and be ready to listen. The world will change one day because we will have listened to the children of the poorest, and because these children will take their destiny in hand.

5.3.3 Communities that Bring the Word to Life

There is an indivisible union between the life of each small Christian community and the world of the Gospel. Indeed, the Gospel becomes the point of reference for these communities, allowing their members to become more susceptible to God's presence in their lives and compelling them to reach out and bring the Word to life in their surroundings. Why is the Gospel such an intrinsic component in the life of a small Christian community and what are the distinctive ways these communities give expression to the Word in their lives? O' Halloran believes that there is a resurgence of interest in the Bible today and that small Christian communities around the world draw much of their inspiration from the wisdom and insights enshrined in scripture. O' Halloran reveals how the small Christian community is effectively a meeting place where individuals come together to reflect on their life experiences in the light of faith and support each other through the difficulties they encounter on their journey through life. In effect, these communities find a sacred space for reflection on the Gospel and come to decipher God's intentions for them in the confusions and uncertainties of this world. Many people, he maintains, are beginning to delve into the vast reservoir of wisdom woven through the lines of scripture and uncover the limitless depths of meaning contained within its precincts. Interestingly, O' Halloran suggests that people are now retrieving for themselves real enlightenment from the world of the Bible and are no longer relying on the interpretations that others ascribe to it:

An interesting phenomenon of our times is that the Bible is to be found back in the hands of the laity. It is no longer the sole preserve of the cleric or the scholar. This is a wholesome development because it was written by ordinary people for ordinary people in the first place. (O' Halloran, 2010:41)

O' Halloran reveals how there is an acceptance in small Christian communities that God's Word is not "fixed and fossilised in a bygone age" that bears little meaning or relevance today but is constantly evolving in correspondence with the experiences of each new faith community through history. Essentially, members of these communities recognise that just as scripture illuminates the realities of this world, so too can all that they discern from the pool of their own experience light up the words of scripture and draw out the timeless truths that lie at its core: "The Word is no longer detached and removed from the world of the believer but is absorbed into the personal and often intimate experiences of each

individual within the community.” O’ Halloran elaborates on what he considers to be a defining feature of the spirituality that underlies the activities of a small Christian community; namely the significance they attach to the life and teachings of Jesus. The story of Jesus, O’ Halloran maintains, is etched indelibly into the psyche of these communities and provides them with a lens for looking at life and ascertaining what is of lasting importance. In his view, “there is a unique quality to the relationship of small Christian communities with Jesus. It is a vital relationship with him. I am at a loss to find words to describe the warmth of this bond” (O’ Halloran, 2010:57). ‘The Fig Tree Group’ in Fatima Mansions epitomise the depth of the bond that exists between the members of a small Christian community and Jesus and their testimonies illustrate the encouragement and hope that they have drawn from the Gospel during their time together. Daly and McQuaide have been members for 28 years now and they continue to derive great sustenance and comfort from reflecting on the life of Jesus and the liberating power of the Gospel message to their lives. Both were asked to reflect on their reasons for making this community such an important part of their lives. McQuaide’s comments convey in their depth and in their sincerity something of the lasting appeal of their small Christian community:

My time with ‘The Fig Tree’ gives me the space to pray with others in community. I feel that I find Jesus in every page. He speaks to me in the silence, in the reflections of others on the Word and in the solidarity we experience as a group. We are no longer alone and the world of scripture becomes part our lives in a special way.

Daly clarifies how their community incorporates the Gospel into the dynamics of their meetings in a simple yet purposeful manner. A Gospel passage is chosen by a member of their group in advance of their meeting, she explains, and it becomes a focal point for the discussions that unfold over the course of the meeting. Each person in the group is then invited to identify a word or phrase from the Gospel passage that carry a particular resonance for them and to reflect on the way these words echo with the realities of their lives at that time. McQuaide explains how their exploration of a Gospel passage never follows a prescribed and preordained route but very much reflects the rich and varied responses that each person ascribes to the passage. Effectively, each member of their group is encouraged to offer their own insights and observations on the piece of scripture and draw the group deeper into the meaning and significance infused in the lines of the Gospel.

Daly reflects on the “sense of solidarity and togetherness” that these discussions have instilled in the group and the confidence she now has in the intrinsic worth of her own beliefs. There is an inherent trust between all members of the group, she insists, sealed over years of friendship and sharing, and each member of their community is receptive to and respectful of all that other members have to offer. This bond of trust, Daly suggests, is a necessity in the life of any small Christian community and helps to explain their enduring commitment to their meetings over the past three decades. Daly attributes her quiet assurance in the power of her own convictions to her time spent with ‘The Fig Tree Group’:

Years ago the bible was above my head. I now read a piece and understand it. People listen to me, hear what I’m saying and understand where my thoughts are coming from. I would love to see the Church spread out among small communities of people who meet to reflect on the Gospel and who come to discover, as I have, the exciting truths that lie inside.

McQuaide’s comments capture the inspiration each of them draw from reflecting on the Gospel and the way they now come to recognise the Word embedded in the everyday realities of their lives. O’ Halloran captures this succinctly: “Scripture is no longer something archaic and removed from the realities of this world. The Word allows us to discover God in the midst of the difficulties and the joys of our daily experiences. God’s presence never fades.” O’ Halloran realises that the meaning implicit in the Word is not parachuted down to each community from a mystical world beyond their confines but is unearthed from the depths of their own experience and springs to life in the everyday world of the community. The people bring their pain, their joys, their brokenness and their hopes to the Gospel, he explains, and they are never disappointed by what they discover. This interplay between the Gospel and the lived experience of the believer lies at the kernel of life in the small Christian community and explains the deep and enduring resonance that the Gospel has in these communities:

Such dialogues between experience and faith frequently create and clarify meanings and reshape lives, and they provide a supportive community during the struggle for meaning and direction. If not for small Christian communities, many persons would have no place to talk about their faith and their relationships in the presence of others who care. (O’ Halloran, 2010:190)

Byrne suggests that the small Christian community affords each member the opportunity to write their own Gospel and to make their own unique mark on the world. The Gospel is incomplete, he insists, and the finishing lines are inscribed in the witness believers give to the Word in their lives. Essentially, Byrne underlines the importance these communities attribute to creating a dynamic in scriptural reflection that gives increased emphasis to living out the meaning of the Word in a world scarred by great suffering and injustice. Byrne cautions against the tendency to confine the Word to some esoteric sphere far removed from the realities of this world: “Seeds of God’s Word and hints of transcendence are generously sprinkled across our community.” What is required, he asserts, is an appreciation of the need to embody the Word and not simply reflect on it so that its meaning can reverberate beyond the realm of the abstract and filter out into the mainstream of this world in real and tangible ways. Byrne captures this essential symmetry that exists between the Word and the medium through which the Word is revealed in the world: “God’s word is enfleshed in this place and does not return to God empty handed” (Byrne, 2008:33). Byrne insists that a genuine commitment to the Word necessitates a willingness to embrace the lives of those who are persecuted and oppressed and discover in their struggle signs of the continued presence of the Word in history:

We meet God in the breaking of bread among the poor and the destitute, among those ravaged by uncertainty and poverty, among those crying out for enlightenment and guidance, among those besieged by worry. Among the broken, the Word is etched into the realities of our world. It is there that we uncover the source to our being.

Byrne is convinced that this emphasis on Christian praxis, this essential fusion between reflection and action, must underpin the life of any authentic Christian community. Indeed, Byrne contends that the poor cannot be excluded from this process but must be encouraged to bring their innate sensitivities and wisdom to bear on all efforts to make the Word meaningful and intelligible in the world today. The task of theology, he suggests, is to pray with people and to empower people to tell their story in the context of a Christian community: “What is required is a way of being community that facilitates the emergence of a new consciousness in the poor of the enrichment that can come through the Gospel and of the challenge posed by the Gospel to the oppressive aspects of their existing society.” Byrne reflects on small Christian communities create an opening for love to become a potent force in the world:

The smallest instances of love, compassion, concern for someone in need of care or enlightenment has the power to effect change. The miniscule and apparently insignificant can be profound and trigger a process of transformation within the individual and seep out into the world where this new found freedom is exercised.

5.3.4 Kingdom Groups Sustained by God's Presence in their Midst

O' Halloran believes that individuals and communities that give precedence to the wellbeing of those most alienated in society contribute to the unfolding of God's kingdom in their time and place. O' Halloran suggests that there is an acceptance in these small Christian communities that any attempt to promote the spiritual in a way that does not issue a corresponding action is spurious and vacant: "Small communities are reflective but don't simply luxuriate in reflection. Their antennae are always facing outward, deciphering ways of making the kingdom real and not illusory." O' Halloran widens the domain in which the kingdom is rolled out in history to encompass the multiplicity of ways in which all people of goodwill, irrespective of their faith, build a better world. "The idea of the kingdom is powerfully unifying and inclusive, and, wherever there is goodness and harmony rooted in justice, the promise of the kingdom is uncovered in the world." O' Halloran contends that the collective power of these communities can become a potent conduit for good in the world, and, in their orchestrated pursuit of a better world, draw the kingdom closer to its accomplishment in the historical realities of our time:

Taking into account the primacy of the kingdom of God, I would now express that cosmic vision as being one of a more cohesive world. A world in which we would foster small Christian communities and encourage them to form communions of communities. Furthermore, I would promote groups of all kinds, whether religious or civic, that are working at grassroots to build a better world (or kingdom), urging them to connect with one another and with small communities in this noble endeavour. (O' Halloran, 2010:69-70)

O' Halloran maintains that these communities are a microcosm of the Kingdom in the world, and, in their compassion and kindness towards the poor, reflect the recurring presence of God's love in history: "Ultimately, the efficacy of each community must be measured in terms of the concrete ways in which it contributes to making God's kingdom a reality." In his book *The Meaning is in the Shadows* (2003), McVerry underlines his conviction that the more humanity engages in small, unheralded projects that promote

justice and compassion in the world, the more each community of faith can signify the arrival of the Kingdom in the immediacy of their time and place:

When I ask, then, where do we find the Kingdom growing here on earth, we look, not for some earth shattering event, but for small projects that no-one knows about, which are trying to improve the quality of life for those who are on the margins. It is the small little efforts, in unheard-of housing estates or isolated rural communities, which are the typical signs of the Kingdom of God... We can all therefore become involved in building the Kingdom. Wherever we are living, whatever we are working at, there we can help to build the Kingdom. (McVerry, 2003:37)

Small Christian communities effectively have a dual purpose; they draw people more deeply into the mystery of God's unrelenting love for humanity and simultaneously propel them outward to be instruments of this love in the world. Peelo offers an interesting perspective on how these communities can become a catalyst for social change: "We met every week simply to come together around the Gospel, to listen and to be listened to and to anticipate ways of bringing the kingdom to life. The solidarity created within the group became a stimulus for social justice." Peelo's comments capture the core conviction that was central to the life of the 'Crumlin Small Christian Community'. God's kingdom is mediated through community, through the bonds of solidarity and compassion that are forged in their discussions together and through their efforts to respond to the needs of those who endure great injustice in very concrete ways. The group prepared an exhibition of stories and paintings coming up to Christmas each year aimed at placing a spotlight on the needs of people whose plight was being ignored in the world and these were put on display in local shopping centres, schools and Churches. Their objective was two-fold; to become a voice for those who were voiceless in the world and to draw inspiration from people who radiated hope and love into the lives of the oppressed in these situations. Each year the group identified specific issues of injustice ranging from the problem of homelessness in Dublin to the plight of the people in Burma who have endured years of persecution under their military dictatorship. Their public awareness campaign culminated in a 'Public Forum for Peace and Justice' where they presented their displays and invited speakers to address the wider public on the stories of persecution and hope emanating from the specific topics chosen by the group. They combined their awareness campaign with a fundraising strategy aimed at helping aid organisations that were responding to the needs of the poor within and beyond their own locality. Their goal was to heighten awareness of

social injustice and at the same time highlight the role Christians could play in bringing the Christian story alive in the world today. Peelo insists that the spiritual orientation of any Christian community must always lean towards the kingdom, sharpening their sensitivity to the needs of the oppressed in their midst and reminding them of their responsibility to be bearers of God's love in the world:

Something new was being awakened in us. We were always encouraged to see beyond the social norms of our time and look at the realities that people had to contend with in their lives. We came away knowing that little bit more and maybe eager to do a little bit more to help. In small ways we tried to live out the message of the kingdom in our lives.

Byrne is convinced that small Christian communities that give precedence to the needs of those exposed to great persecution and suffering in their midst will in turn be invigorated by all that they discover among the poor. Byrne draws inspiration from the inordinate reserves of courage and resilience in those who have to endure unimaginable destitution and suffering in life. The poor possess an indomitable spirit, he insists, that impacts deeply on those who are privileged to share in their journey: "It is my hunch that the outrageous life on offer to us in God's inbreaking kingdom, is an energy which explodes through our various boundary walls" (Byrne, 2008:97). The poor are the ones with a story to tell, he argues, and "there is no salvation for the present Church outside the world of the poor. They are the ones who will bring us to God. It is they who enrich our lives." In his view, the poor are not only the recipients of the Word; they are the bearers of the Christian story in history and give expression to enduring truths that lie at its essence:

The poor are the greatest teachers; their endurance, their compassion and solidarity for each other, their vitality in the face of oppression, and their stark appraisal of what's fake and superfluous in this world. Ultimately, the poor are the real evangelisers.

Byrne argues that the poor are the source of lasting inspiration in his life and that small Christian communities must become places where the wisdom and truth of struggling people is acknowledged and respected. Our first task, he suggests, is to enter into their lives and get sufficiently close to them to discover some of the many ways in which God is already present in them. "God is already at work among the people to whom we reach out with our Good News. Our challenge is to help them to recognise and name the God whose presence is real in their lives but not yet clearly acknowledged." Interestingly, Byrne

maintains that through the medium of story-telling the poor can be encouraged to etch out their own understanding of their existence and become attuned to the presence of a deeper power sustaining them through their struggles: “It is often on the margins of society and of the Christian community, such as the life experienced by most in the North Wall, that the presence of the Spirit is most easily understood and discerned” (Byrne, 2008:119).

McVerry reveals how the resilience and courage of those subjected to great prejudice and injustice in Ireland has left an indelible imprint on his life. McVerry draws much of his energy and inspiration from the plight of those on the margins of society and believes that their incorrigible spirit radiates brightly against the darkened backdrop of their existence and testifies to something deeper and all embracing in their midst: “I have come to discover God’s presence in the lives of the broken and the weak.” McVerry captures the essential quality that he believes the poor have in abundance; their unassailable dignity and humanity as a people. McVerry acclaims the “uncrushable spirit” of the poor that he believes is perceptible in their resolve to support and encourage each other through their difficulties and in their refusal to surrender to the fate that society has determined for them. McVerry recalls how his eyes were opened to the misery of the daily struggles of the poor from the relatively safe and comfortable vantage point of his bus seat on the journeys he made during his time teaching in Belvedere College in the 1970s. The road along Summerhill was the main artery from the school into town, he explains, yet within metres of this bustling byway a forgotten people could be seen struggling to survive, abandoned by a world that simply passed them by. McVerry remembers watching in numbed silence the agony and the exhaustion etched on the faces of the women left cradling their children in the cold and rain and acknowledges the lasting and immovable impression it made on him. It was at this time, he explains, that he began to see things from the perspective of those hidden in an underworld of great oppression and suffering. Life viewed from the standpoint of those forgotten in the shadows of our society has its own distinctive quality:

Every morning, the residents of Summerhill experienced, not just the hardship of life on the margins, but also the indignity of feeling that nobody gave a damn. And every evening, the experience was repeated. The struggle in Summerhill was not just to survive- and some didn’t- but to survive with dignity. Those in Summerhill, like millions in poverty around our world, were the real defenders of human rights as they struggled to affirm their dignity in the face of relentless and persevering opposition. (McVerry, 2003:12)

McVerry maintains that most people remain on the periphery of the world of the poor and shield themselves from engaging actively with anyone outside their own immediate social confines: “The more we have to protect, the stronger the tendency to insulate ourselves from those on the margins whom we may perceive as a threat to our security” (McVerry, 2008:24). Many people on the perimeter, he contends, are quick to condemn the poor and fail to see that their shortcomings are symptomatic of a deeper malaise in the orientation of our society: “Rarely are their needs identified and prioritised by a system that favours spending 20 billion bailing out a doomed bank rather than 20 million to eradicate homelessness.” McVerry is cautious not to over-romanticise the poor and deny the reality of crime and violence that is having such a detrimental impact on marginalised communities around the country:

People in areas of dire destitution are conditioned to think and act in a particular way. Our challenge is to break the cycle of poverty and intervene before it is too late. The consequences of our failure in this regard are all too apparent. Violence, crime, gangland killings, drug abuse all contribute to a deeply sinister and troubling negation of all that is good in humanity.

In most cases, McVerry argues, a life of crime or drug addiction is predetermined for the children in impoverished communities by a society that does not address their needs from an early age and equip them with the skills they need to help reach their aspirations in life: “You can hear the fights in the tenements late into the night mostly caused by their parents abuse of drink or drugs, yet the kids are expected to be up fresh and ready for school in the morning and meet the requirements expected of them by society.” McVerry maintains that many of these children resort to deviant behaviour as a means of escaping the oppressive realities that define their lives and savour, for an instant, the privileges of a world that will invariably remain beyond their grasp:

I condemn crime and all that is wrong and would not encourage it in these children but not as strongly as I condemn a society that puts them in this situation in the first place. I have come to realise how our society has failed them and has not provided them with the services they need to lift the burdens from their shoulders that have been there since childhood. They have radicalised me and I am truly indebted to them.

Donnellan believes that closeness to the poor will help the Church to re-discover a profound new sense of the mystery of God. Donnellan underlines the unique and

unremitting sense of solidarity that he has found in the world of the poor which he believes is refined by their exposure to pain and suffering in life: “These are people who have never lost their humanity, their humour, their thirst for what is right, their humility and who never cease to energise those privileged to partake in their story with their enthusiasm for life.” Donnellan argues that the poor have a marvellous intuition for picking up the essential part of the Christian message and embodying these truths in their lives: “There is something in the poor, something indefinable and sometimes invisible. We all have unfathomable layers of compassion that we rarely delve into but the poor are ready to release this quality into the world if they are given the chance.” Donnellan underscores the importance of giving these people the opportunity and the space to reflect on God’s ongoing involvement in their individual story as a necessary prelude to channelling the power of this love into the life of their community:

Moments of mystery that unravel in the everyday realities of experience are the gateway to uncovering God’s presence in their lives; times of wonder and enchantment, birth, joy, excitement, sorrow all provide a channel between us and God and the people need to be given the space to recognise these moments and the deeper realities that they reveal.

Donnellan is convinced that the powerful bonds of solidarity and kindness the poor forge together to help them through their difficulties is evidence of the deep subliminal life force that animates their existence. The poor are more susceptible to the power of love, he argues, and have stripped life down to the core essentials that really matter. As such, he insists, they represent a potent reminder of what is important in life and draw those privileged to walk alongside them into the mystery of God’s love:

The poor live the truth about humanity in its barest form. The only thing that matters is daily life, the love of the children, keeping the family together against all odds, the dignity of holding a useful job. They cultivate these tiny gestures of love and care not to survive, but to live. We glimpse something of the infinite in their humanity.

5.4 Theme 3: Building Small Christian Communities in Ireland

This phase of the research is primarily concerned with illustrating the practical implications of the ideas that have already been explored in this chapter and indicating how the new vision of Church that has emerged through this inquiry can become a reality in Ireland. Essentially, the objective in this phase is two-fold; to delineate specific steps to

facilitate the process of forming a small Christian community and to explore ways of generating momentum into these communities once they are established. The question this theme addresses is clear; how can the paradigm of Base Christian Community emanating from Latin America be embedded into an Irish setting? What follows is a series of guidelines that can be developed in accordance with the idiosyncrasies and potentialities that are unique to each group in communities and parishes around the country.

The first step (Section 5.4.1, pp.255-259) draws its inspiration from the interviews with Dorr and O' Halloran. It became clear over the course of these interviews and subsequent reflection on their writings that the best way to initiate a small Christian community is to consider possibilities beyond the existing parameters of the Church and build on the dynamism of groups and organisations that are already enriching the life of their community. This step emphasises the importance of reaching out to the many groups and organisations already contributing to the wellbeing of their community and creating an environment where they are free to express their views on the nature of reform that they feel is necessary for the Church in Ireland. The overriding interest in this first step is to illustrate the importance of promoting a new paradigm of Church in consultation with the people at the grassroots who are committed to improving the wellbeing of people in their community.

The second step (Section 5.4.2, pp.259-266) highlights the importance of providing a stimulus to set the process of forming a small Christian community in motion. What is particularly striking in the interviews with members of 'The Crumlin Small Christian Community' and 'The Fig Tree Group' in Fatima Mansions is that each group needed a catalyst at the beginning to introduce them to the concept of small Christian community and to help them to recognise their potential as a group to give expression to a new style of Christian witness in their community. While they had worked closely together on projects in their respective communities, they still needed a 'spark' to open their group up to the dynamics of a small Christian community. The question remains; how do you encourage the formation of a small Christian community among people who may not have previously worked closely together as a group and yet are open to exploring the possibilities that this new model of Church presents? The researcher worked alongside an Action Learning Set in The Edmund Rice Heritage Centre in Waterford with a view to exploring ways in which they could encourage people in the city to form their own small Christian community (See

Section 2.6.3, pp.59-62). The team decided on a course of action and the findings that emerge from the Action Research that followed serve to heighten the importance of having specific strategies to initiate the process of forming a small Christian community.

It is important to build on the enthusiasm and interest that is generated at the commencement of a small Christian community and to pinpoint the defining elements that are integral to the growth and development of a small Christian community. The third step (Section 5.4.3, pp.267-274) stems from the exchange of ideas among participants in the Action Learning Set as they defined what they considered to be the fundamental principles on which each small Christian community must be grounded if it is to endure. Over the course of the first two meetings, the Action Learning Set explored the vision of Church that underpins the energy and dynamism of the Base Christian Communities in Latin America and devised a strategy to promote this model of Church in the city. In their final meeting, their attention turned to identifying what they considered to be essential to sustaining the life of each new community (See Section 2.6.4, pp.62-64 and Appendix 2, p.337). By adapting the interventions to the activities of 'The Omagh Waterford Peace Choir', the researcher endeavours to illustrate how each intervention has added greater clarity and purpose to the goals that are intrinsic to the identity of the choir. This role of the researcher as reflective practitioner is integral to the process of testing the applicability of the findings that emerged from the discussions with The Action Learning Set and ascertaining the effectiveness of the interventions defined by the team.

5.4.1 Step 1: Build on What is Already There

O' Halloran and Dorr have both written extensively on the importance of broadening the boundaries of Church and taking cognisance of the potential of people beyond the walls of the Church to bring renewed vigour and direction to the Church's mission in the world. Both were asked to reflect on strategies that could draw people in from the fringes into the heart of a new ecclesial dynamic in Ireland. O' Halloran repeatedly alludes to the potential for small Christian communities to emerge from some of the many diverse community groups and organisations that contribute to the advancement of all that is good in their local environment. O' Halloran maintains that many of the youth groups, charitable organisations, justice and ecological groups naturally lean towards this new paradigm of Christian community and are already deeply committed to releasing a new energy and

dynamism into their communities: “There are many existing groups in Ireland today that are radiating the life force of human goodness into their communities and are playing a crucial role in building the conditions for a better world.” It is clear that Small Christian communities find a natural resonance among people who give of their time selflessly to create opportunities for others to develop their talents and potential and who channel their energies to generate a new vitality in their communities. The Crumlin Small Christian Community, he explains, grew out of the enthusiasm of a small group of young adults who provided summer holiday programmes for children from disadvantaged backgrounds in their locality in the 80s and 90s. O’ Halloran reveals how this small Christian community drew its energy and its impetus from the ongoing success of this programme and created the opportunity for the team leaders to build on the friendships and the spirit of generosity that was already clearly established within their group:

The seed for what was to come was very much there from the start. There was a great energy in the group and a great solidarity emerged naturally through their involvement in the summer programme. They were ‘ripe’ for something beyond what they had experienced, something that would draw their lives more deeply into the spiritual source of all they were doing.

Dorr believes that the current demise of the Church challenges Catholics here to bring something new to the Church and ease the Church out from its narrow confines to embrace the boundless reservoir of possibility that exists beyond its walls. Dorr insists that this transition from a community group to a small Christian community can happen seamlessly when the opportunity is given to each member to put their own stamp on the style of community that they want to participate in. The irony, Dorr contends, is that the momentum for this radical shift in emphasis will need to be generated by those outside the traditional boundaries of the Church if it is to be effective. The world of the “unchurched”, he insists, can spearhead a new revival in the Church here and pave the way for a new synergy in the Church between its structures and its people:

I believe that this is a good time for the church in the Western world to change its overall priority- to change from an attitude of maintenance and servicing of our present practising communities, to what I would call ‘frontier’ work’... work on and beyond the regular boundaries of the church. This calls for a ‘reaching out attitude’ and an eagerness to enter what seem like foreign ‘worlds’, especially the world of the ‘unchurched’ and the world of those who are engaged in a spiritual search. (Dorr, 2004:205)

Dorr emphasises two ways in which reaching out to new ‘frontiers’ can happen. The first necessitates a willingness on the part of leaders to discover in the penumbra of social groups and organisations “a zone where Christian values, truths, rituals and symbols have an impact on the lives of people who are not Church members” (Dorr, 2003:586). Dorr anticipates a time when the Church draws its sustenance from the unique testimony of its people and begins “to recognise, affirm, and help to nourish the good values which animate the lives of people”, including those whose cultural roots are not Christian (Dorr, 2003:586). Dorr illustrates instances where this might happen, like hosting a special ‘earth day’ for ecological movements, environmental groups and all who “are nourished by the resonance we find in nature” (Dorr, 2004:214). Dorr explains that a second way to engage in frontier work is to create openings for all people to experience “the beautiful rituals and symbols which the church provides to “carry” and deepen their sense of community and solidarity” (Dorr, 2004:214). He sees that this is especially true of the Eucharist, “the most powerful of all Christian symbols and rituals” and the “symbolic high point of Christian faith” (Dorr, 2004:216). Dorr takes his starting-point, and inspiration, from the parable of the banquet (Luke 14:21-23). The owner of the house brought in the most unlikely of guests, including the poor, the blind and the lame, from the highways and the hedgerows. Dorr clarifies how many attending had little sense of what they were coming to or little communion (at first) with the others. The primary responsibility for forging this new alliance lay with the owner and his close friend. Dorr explains how this core group “hold in place the full meaning of what is taking place” and, therefore, recognise the need to “extend their community to embrace those who had been invited in from outside” (Dorr, 2004:217).

O’ Halloran is convinced that the key to initiating a small Christian community is to encourage a process that evolves in correspondence with what is already having a positive impact in the wider social community. Interestingly, O’ Halloran cautions against promoting “an instant community” that accelerates at full pace from the start. Instead, O’ Halloran believes that the more patiently the process evolves and the less forced it is from the beginning, the more likely it is to endure. The danger, he explains, is that if these communities are pushed too hard in the initial stages, the motivation and ‘drive’ that propels them will wane in time: “I am convinced that what evolves slowly has a better chance of unearthing from within what is needed to sustain it into the future. We must begin humbly at grassroots and see where the Spirit takes us.” O’ Halloran alludes to the

importance of giving the community “a space to breathe” from the start and not imposing structures that could suffocate its momentum. It is more beneficial to everyone, he suggests, if the meetings encourage a relaxed and more casual encounter from the beginning and that the choice of venue reflects this informality:

Some people imagine that small Christian communities are composed of members who always engage in deep prayerful discussion and meet in places purely associated with religious worship. Not so. These communities are made up of ordinary people who gather together in a house of one of the members to form community and to simply chat about things that are important to them at the time in the light of their Christian faith.

Dorr believes that it is important to facilitate a process of dialogue and consultation in these groups as they explore the possibility of forming their own small Christian community so that each person is instrumental in determining the course their new community takes from the outset. Dorr is acutely aware that no two groups are the same and that each new community does not necessarily need to replicate the established practices in other communities. In his view, every member is central to the dynamic of a small Christian community and their enthusiasm and ideas are integral to the process of carving out a new direction for their group: “Nothing is imposed on members of these groups. Instead, the reins are very much in their hands. Each member shapes and influences the path their community takes from the beginning.”

Essentially, O’ Halloran and Dorr believe that it is important to cast the net beyond the traditional structures of the Church and discover in the creativity and dynamism of existing groups in the wider social community the potential for this new model of Church to emerge. Dorr believes that the small Christian community effectively provides this space for people to come together, to be enriched and challenged by what they encounter within their community and to draw direction from the vast expanse of their own spiritual reserves in their quest for a new meaning and purpose in life. Dorr is convinced that this emphasis on “listening” is the key to the continuity of each new community and he maintains that these communities are more likely to endure if they reflect the guidance drawn from their members and the needs and expectations that they bring to their community: “Central to the challenge of initiating a small Christian community is the need to ascertain the views of the members on the best way forward for their community.” Dorr reveals how one recurring theme emerges from this consultative process in many of the

workshops that he has facilitated on small Christian community; people are searching for a ‘space’ where they can engage in meaningful dialogue with others and where they begin to experience the value of solidarity and companionship in a world of great uncertainty and change. His observations emanate from the views articulated by the participants in these workshops and shed an interesting perspective on the appeal of a small Christian community for a growing number of people in Ireland today:

There is a real hunger for spirituality in our time. Many people who have become disillusioned with formal religions are still looking for a meaning in life and a source of hope and spiritual energy. They seek peace of mind, harmony with their neighbours, healing and reconciliation for wounded relationships, justice in society, and a sense of communion with nature... They do not want to hear people talking ‘at’ them about God; they want to experience God directly, to feel the Spirit moving in their heart and guiding their lives. They want to experience community, to feel warm with people, to love and be loved, to celebrate. They want a spirituality which is earthy, of the body, but which at the same time finds an echo in their souls. (Dorr, 2004:7)

5.4.2 Step 2: Provide ‘a stimulus’ to Encourage this New Style of Community.

Dorr and O’ Halloran agree that each new small Christian community needs a ‘spark’ at the beginning to ignite it into life. People can be reluctant to try something new, O’ Halloran observes, and often need to be encouraged to take the first tentative steps in embracing this new style of Christian community. What is clear, he believes, is that ‘a stimulus’ is needed to activate the process of forming a small Christian community, something innovative and challenging that binds people in the group from the beginning and gives them the opportunity to experience for themselves the value of coming together to reflect on their experience in light of the Gospel. To illustrate this, O’ Halloran recalls how he organised “a weekend away” in the Salesian Retreat House in Clare for the leaders of the summer camp to provide them with the opportunity to reflect together on ways that they could build on the camaraderie and enjoyment that they had amassed over the summer months. Peelo, one of the leaders in the summer programme, reveals how the weekend brought the friendships that they had built over the course of the summer camp to “a new level” and eased them very naturally into a way of being together as a community. Peelo believes that the inspiration for their small Christian community came from the encounter they shared together in Clare: “The weekend challenged us to take notice of

God's ongoing participation in our lives and to anticipate ways of working together to help people who had to endure great suffering and persecution in the world.”

Connell remembers watching a documentary on the plight of the people of East Timor and the profound impact it had on the entire group. Up to that point, she recalls, they were drifting through the weekend, enjoying their discussions, their meals together and the freedom of being away from their normal environs for the weekend. Connell observes how the images of young students their own age being massacred at the funeral of one of their friends in ‘The Santa Cruz Cemetery’ in East Timor by the Indonesian Armed troops made a powerful impression on the group and prompted them to explore ways in which they could fight for the rights of those who were voiceless in the world. Connell remembers the profound impact this experience had on the entire group:

There was a numbing silence after the video. We could not believe the scale and the savagery of what we saw. I wanted to find out more and wanted to do more to help those who were exposed to great injustice in my own country and beyond. I guess my insular world had been penetrated by the cry of those who are voiceless, shaking me out of my indifference and compelling me to act. There was no turning back.

It is clear that the weekend encounter acted as ‘a catalyst’ for the group in their transition to becoming a small Christian community. Connell reveals how the group began to see things differently from that time and wanted to discover ways of pooling their collective talents and energies to alleviate the suffering of others less privileged in the world. The events of the weekend culminated in a celebration of the Eucharist on the final morning which Connell recalls “stirred something deep within the group and helped us all to believe that God wanted to become part of their lives in special ways.” They had become attuned to the cry of the poor and the persecuted like never before, she recalls, and left Clare knowing the importance of being a voice for the voiceless and playing their part in initiating a new time of justice and love in the world. This short time together left an indelible imprint on all their lives and stirred them to discover ways in which they could, together as a community, take their faith and the plight of the world's poor more seriously.

Daly's observations on how ‘The Fig Tree Group’ in Fatima Mansions was first set in motion are equally revealing and reinforce the importance of injecting some momentum into the process of forming a small Christian community at its commencement. Daly recognises how her own small Christian community in Fatima Mansions did not naturally

evolve of its own accord but needed “a trigger” of some sort to ‘kick-start’ the process and to invigorate it with life. Daly recalls how she and several other parents who had formed ‘The Sunflower Club’ to help children in their locality to develop their artistic and creative talents were, in turn, encouraged to consider ways in which they could support each other in their endeavour to generate a new confidence in their community. Daly is in no doubt that the source of the inspiration for their small Christian community came from outside the immediate confines of their group. John O Brien, a priest and friend of the group, recognised the positivity and self-belief that this club was instilling in the children and set about creating an opportunity for the leaders to come together to reflect on the enduring significance and value of their work:

The Sunflower Club helped to give people a sense of what they could achieve. We did knitting, collage and pasting and the kids began to realise that they too could create something. People began to express themselves and discover a sense of themselves and what they were capable of. Parents would gather to witness their children’s work and slowly a new hope was born. Fr. John believed in us from the very start and challenged us to come together and reflect on the importance of what we were doing.

Daly recalls how O’ Brien always encouraged them to tackle the abject social degradation that they had to contend with and to believe in their own capacity to bring about real transformation. O’ Brien invited the group to participate with him in a series of Gospel workshops each evening over the course of five days that concluded with a special liturgy for the group at the end of the week. Something very powerful happened during that week, Daly recalls, that infused a new life into the group and instilled in each of them a new awareness of God’s continuous involvement in their lives. The series of reflective workshops on the Gospel motivated them to create this “quiet space” in their week where they could come together to draw inspiration from the Christian story and renew their enthusiasm to promote a new optimism and hope in their community. Daly is aware that the genesis of their small Christian community goes back to this series of workshops almost 30 years ago and that they continue to reap the fruits of the seed that was planted at that time. She is convinced that this positive spiritual experience at the outset transformed their group into a small Christian community:

A small Christian community will grow organically out of what is happening in the community but a creative spark is needed to link the social initiatives to prayer. This process cannot be overly religious from the start as many people resist anything connected with God

given their bewilderment with the Church. So, from the outset, something very natural must happen, something that draws the people effortlessly into the domain of the spiritual.

The series of events that were undertaken by The Action Learning Set in ‘The Edmund Rice Heritage Centre’ provide a template for a plan of action that mobilises people from across the spectrum of the wider social community who may not necessarily have known each other in the past to come together to form a small Christian community (See Appendix 2, pp.332-337). The group agreed that some key stimulus was needed to introduce people to the concept of small Christian community and proceeded to set out a series of clearly defined steps that would help them to achieve their goal: firstly, to organise a Carol Service aimed specifically at people who have become disillusioned with the institutional Church, and, secondly, to hold a workshop within a month of the Carol Service to heighten awareness of this new model of Church and to stimulate discussion on the possibility of starting a small Christian community in Waterford. The group decided to invite members of ‘The Fig Tree Group’ to attend the workshop and give a unique insight into the appeal of a small Christian community. The success of the strategy hinged on giving people a positive experience of being part of a Christian community in the Carol Service and that a new small Christian community would emerge out of workshop that followed. The most effective way of promoting the event was ‘spreading the word’ by personal invitation and every attempt was made to ‘widen the net’ so that people alienated from the Church and not partial to attending religious events would be encouraged to attend. On the night, ‘The Waterford Omagh Peace Choir’ provided the music and a series of reflections and poems were interspersed with the carols to create a calm yet uplifting spiritual experience. Over 400 people attended the 45 minute service that blended music, readings and time for quiet reflection in the peaceful and candlelit environs of ‘The Edmund Rice Chapel’. At the end of the service, one of the team addressed the gathering briefly to encourage anyone interested in attending a workshop on small Christian community to leave their contact details as they left. Br. Kevin Mascarenhas, a participant in the Action Learning Set, speaks about the motivation this service provided for the formation of a new small Christian community in Waterford:

The first small Christian community in the city has started in Mount Sion and it came out of this simple but powerful service that gave people a chance to glimpse God’s presence helping them through their pain and suffering. There was a profound sense that night that just as

God entered the world in a special way in Bethlehem all those years ago, so too God wants to enter our world today through our brokenness and anxieties and infuse a new hope into our lives. The event touched the lives of many people and signalled the birth of our own small Christian community.

The goal of the Action Learning Set was to form a small Christian community from the pool of interested participants in the workshop that followed the Carol Service. The aim of the workshop was two-fold; to generate an interest in small Christian community and to ascertain from the 22 participants how best to initiate a new community in the city. The seating was arranged in a circle to facilitate discussion, and, at each stage of the workshop, participants were encouraged to articulate their response to what they had learned. In the opening phase of the workshop, one of the two facilitators nominated by the Action Learning Set encouraged everyone who attended to introduce themselves and to speak about positive initiatives that they have been part of in the past that gave them a sense of being part of a community. The 10 minute interaction between participants was informal and relaxed and set the tone for the discussions that were to follow. The second facilitator then outlined some of the defining features of a small Christian community drawn up by the Action Learning Set in advance of the workshop. The facilitator made a short 10 minute presentation, combining a series of photographs depicting the activities of small Christian communities around the world with a short commentary on how these images captured the distinctive elements of this new way of being Church in the world (See Appendix 2, pp.338-341) The effect was to enable the participants to visualise the effectiveness of the model of small Christian community in energising the mission of the Church throughout the world. Each participant was then given the opportunity to respond to the presentation and to outline their own vision of Church. The discussion that followed lasted 30 minutes. O' Halloran underlines the importance of creating a dynamic in these workshops that imparts information without stifling discussion if the goal of forming a new community is to be realised:

During the workshop the animating team can share guidelines regarding the practical workings of the communities and the vision that accompanies them... there is no neat package to unwrap; no clear blueprint. There are only ideas and down-to-earth suggestions that can help groups move in the right general direction. And, most importantly, everything said at a workshop has to be examined by the participants in the light of their own experience, because they have to make it flesh and blood in their situation. (O' Halloran, 2010:76)

Daly, McQuaide and McKenna from 'The Fig Tree Group' in Fatima Mansions then spoke about the enduring appeal of their small Christian community and the core elements that have strengthened and sustained their group over the years. McQuaide highlighted the bonds of friendship that exists between members of their community and how 'The Fig Tree Group' has become a place where they can speak freely about issues and concerns that are important to them in their lives. McQuaide alluded to the difficulty of finding the space for real communication in her daily routine and that the hour they spend together each Monday has given her the opportunity to listen and to be listened to. McKenna underlined the importance of the Gospel to their meetings and how they come to discover something new in the words of Scripture every time they come together to reflect. Daly spoke poignantly about how 'The Fig Tree Group' has given her the confidence to confront issues that she would previously have tried to ignore in her life. All three spoke with a confidence and a conviction that left a deep impression on people and prompted people to envisage ways in which this model of Church could be actualised in Waterford. The recurring idea that emerged through these discussions is that the 'Fig Tree Group' is not an alternative to the Church but a new way of being Church that brings the Gospel alive in the world today. This was followed by a short 15 minute reflective session led by McKenna and McQuaide that eased the participants into experiencing first-hand how the Gospel animates the life of a small Christian community. They lit a candle, handed out a copy of a Gospel passage to each participant in the workshop, nominated 5 people to read a segment each, encouraged everyone to identify a line from the Gospel passage that resonated with them and then gave people the opportunity to speak about the meaning the passage held for them. People were remarkably honest and open given that many had not met each other previously and this reflective session finished with a time of quiet prayer.

The participants then decided on practical measures that would facilitate the formation of a new small Christian community in Waterford and many signalled their enthusiasm to be part of whatever was to come from these discussions. At the end of the workshop, a date and time was set for the commencement of 'The Edmund Rice Small Christian Community'. It was agreed that no reminder would be given to people in advance of the first gathering so that the decision was very much left to the discretion of each person. Those who attended the first meeting would discuss the format and regularity of their meetings and devise ways of assimilating what they had learned from the workshop into the dynamism of their new community. O' Halloran alludes to the importance of initiating

a definitive course of action towards the end of the workshop with a view to establishing how the goal of forming a new small Christian community can be reached: “Vague intentions are of no use at this point. What is called for are about *four or five precise concrete steps* that will help to launch the groups. So the participants are urged to discern these through dialogue and the guidance of the Holy Spirit” (O’ Halloran, 2010:76). 10 people turned up for the first meeting and a new small Christian community had commenced. The group decided on the following concrete steps to help in early stages of forming their community; they all agreed to meet once a month on the last Tuesday of each month, leadership would be rotated from one meeting to the next with one member of the community selecting a piece of scripture, poem or song that stimulate discussion at each meeting, the meeting would last no more than one hour and would finish with a relaxed chat over a cup of tea and the group would identify ways in which they could reach out and support members of their wider community who were in need. Sheelagh Fitzgerald, one of the 10 people who attended the first meeting, reflects on her reasons for joining this small Christian community as she embarks on a new stage of her faith journey:

I’m not sure why I came initially. I just feel a strong need for something more than what I experience in my existing faith world. The team from Fatima Mansions gave me a whole new perspective on Christian community and showed me what it is like to belong to a faith community. This sense of belonging is what I have been missing. They showed me the way forward. (E-Mail: March, 2012)

It is clear that small Christian communities do not always evolve naturally of their own accord and that it can be helpful to provide a catalyst to stimulate a new small Christian community into life. What is particularly striking in the interviews with members of existing small Christian communities and in the response of participants in the workshop is that many people are searching for a more meaningful way of giving expression to their faith. People may be disillusioned with the current dynamic of Church but are still open to exploring new avenues that will open up new possibilities for them in their faith journey. The origins of ‘The Fig Tree Group’, ‘The Leixlip Parish Cell Community’, ‘The Crumlin Small Christian Community’ and ‘The Edmund Rice Small Christian Community’ testify to the value of creating the conditions for people to come together in a reflective, spiritual environment to discuss their views on the style of Christian community that they would like to be part of. It is helpful to reflect on the initial strategies that influenced the formation of these communities with a view to ascertaining the parallels that exist between

each of them. The guidelines that emerge from this inquiry can be adapted to the vagaries and characteristics unique to each group and setting:

- Create an atmosphere that draws people into the realm of the spiritual. Candlelight and music are effective ways of encouraging people to become more reflective and prayerful.
- Create a space where people are free to speak and where they are listened to. There needs to be an emphasis on dialogue and consultation from the start.
- Do not burden those who attend with too much information. Limit the presentation on small Christian community to a short time and consider using photographs and stories to illustrate the points being made.
- It is most beneficial to have people who are members of existing small Christian communities present or people with direct experience of this style of community as their testimony is a powerful means of generating interest in this new model of Church.
- It is important to broaden the boundaries of how people understand Church from the beginning and to heighten an awareness of the responsibility of Christians to help those who are marginalised and impoverished in the world. A creative use of slides or film can help to capture the need to reach out and help those who have no voice in the world.
- Give participants the opportunity to reflect in small groups on a Gospel passage so that they can experience the potential of scripture to open up important truths in life.
- Draw up a specific course of action at the end of the event and allow the participants to shape and influence the direction their small Christian community takes.
- Above all, make the event as relaxed and informal as possible. The welcome beforehand and the refreshments afterwards put people at their ease from the start and help to establish the camaraderie and friendships that are essential to the life of a small Christian community.

5.4.3 Step 3: Create the Conditions for the Community to Grow and Develop.

After the workshop, The Action Learning Set met for one final time to draw up key interventions that would contribute to the growth and development of a small Christian community once it is established. The Action Learning Set divided into teams of three and each group explored what they considered to be the core components essential to the life of a small Christian community (See Appendix 3, pp.336-337). In advance of this, the researcher played a short excerpt from the film ‘Romero’ and re-visited the key themes that were explored in the 2 previous meetings. The insights that emerged over the course of the discussions that followed helped to crystallise a clearer picture of how to add impetus to a small Christian community through each phase of its development so that the momentum generated at the start could be felt throughout the lifetime of the small Christian community. The Action Learning Set then proposed 3 interventions that they believed would give clarity and direction to the activities of a small Christian community and these were then applied to an existing small Christian community: Intervention No. 1: ‘Create an environment that promotes spiritual reflection and creates an openness with the community to God’s ongoing presence in their lives’; Intervention No. 2: ‘Encourage an emphasis on Christian praxis so that the community continually looks at ways of reaching out beyond its immediate confines’ and Intervention No. 3: ‘Promote a new style of shared leadership that breaks away from a reliance on one person and taps into the diverse talents available to the group’.

At this stage, the researcher took on the role of reflective practitioner and devised ways of adapting the guidelines that emanated from these discussions to the mechanisms of ‘The Waterford Omagh Peace Choir’ and their efforts to give expression to this new style of Christian community in Ireland today. (See Appendix 3, pp.342-345) The choir was formed in the aftermath of a terrorist attack that killed 31 people in Omagh in 1998 and has been committed to promoting a message of peace and reconciliation through our music ever since. The choir is comprised of Catholics and Protestants from Omagh in Northern Ireland and from Waterford in Southern Ireland who believe that what unites them as Christians is far more powerful than anything that could divide them. Each member brings their own distinctive personality and sound to the dynamic of the choir and the collective power of their diverse voices is a potent symbol of their shared aspiration for a new style of society on this island where difference and discord gives way to something more

inclusive and harmonious. Dorr emphasises the value of finding an effective way of allowing the core convictions that are intrinsic to the life of a small Christian community filter out into the wider social arena in a language and style that people can relate to. The choir's evangelisation is carried out through the medium of music and the concerts that they perform make it possible for their message to reverberate out into society. Dorr believes that when communities find innovative ways of spreading their message out into a wider social milieu, a new, more authentic style of evangelisation becomes possible:

There is no such thing as evangelisation in the abstract. It always has to be done in a given situation, within a particular culture and in a particular political and social context. It is always a matter of enabling the gospel to intersect with the way of life of a people or community. This is called *inculturation*. So evangelisation and inculturation are just two sides of the same process. (Dorr, 2004: 173)

Dorr maintains that small Christian communities must gather their momentum from within but always project outwards so that they gradually bring their convictions to bear on the vagaries of their social context. The alternative, he suggests, would be to create a community that shields itself from its responsibilities in this world and becomes progressively more insular and esoteric as it evolves. The choir outreach to members of the Catholic and Protestant community raises a fundamental question in relation to the potential of small Christian communities to break down the traditional religious divides on this island; can this model of Church create an opening for a new ecumenical climate in Ireland and accelerate a new movement towards reconciliation and dialogue? (See Section 1.4, p.11). 'The Waterford Omagh Peace Choir' signifies what can be achieved when Christians unite to promote the Christian message and become a force for reconciliation in the world.

Intervention No.1: Create an environment that promotes spiritual reflection and creates an openness within the community to God's ongoing presence in their lives.

In their discussions, The Action Learning Set repeatedly alluded to how it has become increasingly difficult today to uncover a deeper dimension to existence in a culture obsessed with devising more advanced ways of communication that amplifies the social at the expense of the spiritual. The group strongly recommend that small Christian communities must continually look for ways of re-aligning their activities with the ongoing movement of the Spirit in the world today and create a new social environment that liberates rather than stifles the natural spiritual impulse in people. Ann Hayes captures

the role these communities can play in helping people to become attuned to a deeper, more spiritual undercurrent in their lives:

Ordinary people need to become attuned to the active presence of the Spirit and discover in the depths of their existence God's involvement in their lives. A small Christian community draws people into the vast reservoir of God's love so that they can become instruments of this love in the world.

Hayes is convinced that the call for members of a small Christian community to become agents of transformation in the world can be heard only when they strike a chord that the Spirit has already touched within. Over the past 6 months, 'The Waterford Omagh Peace Choir' has explored new ways of assimilating prayer and reflection into our workshops in advance of concerts. At the start of each workshop, members of the choir have a relaxed chat and encourage each other to relate how things have been for them since our last time together. A few choir members bring lines from a Gospel passage, poem or song that they value and share the significance it holds for them with the rest of the choir. This reflective time finishes with some spontaneous prayers that surface very naturally from these discussions. One of the directors co-ordinates these short reflective sessions so that every member has the option of presenting a 'reflective piece' to the choir at some point over the year. It has provided the group with some quiet, reflective time before the rehearsal commences and has the effect of consolidating the bonds of trust and openness that are essential to the unity of the group. This emphasis on spiritual dialogue is integral to the life of any small Christian community and can make each member more susceptible to the movement of the Spirit in their lives. John Kelly, a member of the choir and one of the team of Directors, captures the impact this new emphasis on spiritual reflection has had on the choir:

These quieter moments tend to stir up the motivation we need to communicate our message with genuine conviction. Everything is slowed right down, and, in the calm, we get to see the value of what we do more clearly. Something new and reflective is slowly beginning to filter its way into the choir.

Intervention No.2: Encourage an emphasis on Christian praxis so that the community continually looks at ways of reaching out beyond its immediate confines.

The Action Learning Set strongly endorsed the importance of Christian praxis in the life of any small Christian community and recommend that each community should identify a project or a goal at the outset to give shape and purpose to their activities. Their

discussions clearly indicate the need for the whole Christian community to shift focus and to become more keenly aware of its mission to the wider world. Mascarenhas, a member of The Action Learning Set, articulates the importance of this emphasis on shared Christian praxis, maintaining that “a shared goal or vision helps to ensure that each community can discover within itself the capacity to release the power of love into the world in meaningful and exciting ways.” Essentially, The Action Learning Set urges small Christian communities to identify ‘a burning issue’ that will ignite something within the group and inspire them to play their part in making a difference in the world.

In the past, members of ‘The Waterford Omagh Peace Choir’ were actively involved in a fundraising campaign to meet the needs of children who were left orphaned in Sri Lanka in the wake of the tsunami that had a devastating impact on the country in 2004. Three years ago, 24 choir members visited Sri Lanka to oversee the building of some of the new orphanages that they were funding and to meet with the children who were already living in the completed “homes”. The children in Sri Lanka mesmerised them with their smiles, their grace and their determination to succeed in life. Last summer, some of the choir visited Sri Lanka to spend time with the children and to evaluate the impact their new home is having on their studies in school. They were surprised to discover that when the children reach the age of 18, they are expected to leave their homes and ‘fend for themselves’ in the world with very little chance of pursuing their dreams and hopes in life.

After several meetings with choir members over the past few months, they have identified a ‘burning issue’ that is important to every member of the choir. Their goal is to set up a scholarship programme for children who have the academic potential to go on to further their education when they leave school but lack the financial resources needed to do so. Over the coming months, the choir will perform two concerts, one in Omagh and one in Waterford, to raise funds so that the scholarship programme can commence in September. They intend to roll out this programme gradually over the coming years and have identified 3 students who will start University in Colombo in September, 2012. Their plan is to visit Sri Lanka again in the summer of 2013 to meet with the students and to assess their progress. The choir has established strong ties with the religious congregations that are running the various homes and they have agreed to oversee the implementation of our scholarship programme. The ‘burning issue’ of the choir is simply to give these children the same opportunities in life that we have and to make it possible for them to realise their

educational aspirations. Lesley Caldwell, one of the team of Directors, reveals the reward that comes from working on these projects and the powerful impression these children have made on her life:

Our time in Sri Lanka was a life changing experience for everyone in the choir. The children welcomed us into their homes and their lives and they reminded us of all that is important in life. These children are born into situations where the odds are stacked against them from the start and we know that we can do something to give them the chance to achieve what they are capable of. It is they who have renewed our spirit with their grace and their humility and we who are truly humbled.

Intervention No.3: Promote a new style of shared leadership that breaks away from a reliance on one person and taps into the diverse talents available to the group.

The Action Learning Set recommends that the leadership in any small Christian community is shared among a team of people at any given time and that these leaders facilitate a dynamic that encourages the contribution that each member can make to the life of the community. The recurring theme that emanated from these discussions is that each community is essentially a team of people who listen to each other and draw inspiration and strength from each other in their efforts to exert a transforming influence in the world and that no one person should have a monopoly of power or control in the evolution of a small Christian community. Indeed, The Action Learning Set believes that the continuity of a small Christian community hinges on the capacity of the team of leaders to be good listeners and to harness the collective wisdom and energy of the group at each phase of its development. Dorr reiterates this emphasis on building community through consensus and dialogue and anticipating ways of incorporating the views and opinions of everyone into the shared aspirations of the community:

It is very helpful if the members of the team or community can find agreement on their overall aim and the values they stand for. They can then go on to work out their strategy and tactics for achieving their common purpose. At this stage the ideal is that different members of the group throw their ideas and suggestions into the common pool, and then 'let them go'. This means that everybody can evaluate and build on the various pooled ideas, scarcely adverting to who first proposed them. (Dorr, 2004:49)

This new style of team leadership is beginning to have a profound impact on the decision making process in 'The Waterford Omagh Peace Choir'. In the past, Directors of the choir

presented members with a Mission Statement at the start of each year to outline plans for the coming year and to identify the core, guiding principles that are underpin the varied schedule of the choir. This year, the Mission Statement was presented only after first engaging in a process of consultation with all of the members at the commencement of the new choir season in September. Each member of the choir was encouraged to put their own stamp on the ethos of the choir and to give their views on the activities that should be prioritised by the choir in the next year (See Appendix 3, pp.344-345). In the aftermath of a series of concerts they performed in The Odyssey Arena in Belfast at an Evangelical Event last April, the choir was invited by the promoters to participate in a series of similar events over the next few years. The choir discussed the merits of singing at these gatherings but each member, without exception, argued that we were in danger of losing touch with our real identity as a choir by being over-associated with these high-profile evangelical events. Essentially, each member of the choir has helped to define a clear path forward for the choir and left their own imprint on the Mission Statement for the coming season. Following these discussions, the choir has accepted an invitation to sing at a service in Sean McDermott Street, Dublin among communities who are determined to work together to become a force for change in the North Inner City. The choir is now moving in a direction mapped out by the insights and convictions that each member brings to the group. The events they select to perform very much reflect the goals outlined in the mission statement. The choir has been invited to sing in Messines, Belgium at a commemoration to mark the anniversary of 'The 1914 Peace Truce'. The choir will have the opportunity to spread its message in a place synonymous with peace and reconciliation and capture the poignancy and power of what happened that Christmas. Lesley's comments encapsulate what this event means to the entire choir:

I cannot imagine what it would have felt like when the silence that hovered over the trenches was interrupted by the sound of a lone tenor voice singing 'Silent Night'. Both sides left the sanctuary of the trenches, walked across 'no man's land' and played football together. Something timeless spilled out onto the battlefields that will never be forgotten. Our concert will help us to evoke the significance of all that happened that Christmas. Two sides momentarily glimpsed their shared humanity and the absurdity of what they were part of. Maybe we can play some part in making sure that their legacy lives on.

The Action Learning Set reflected on the most effective and inclusive way of organising a small Christian community. They recommend that that each community should have a

group of co-ordinators that rotate from year to year who are freed from a mindset of domination and are committed to creating an atmosphere of trust and co-operation in their meetings together. Peelo and Connell in 'The Crumlin Small Christian Community' reveal the effectiveness of this emphasis on team leadership in the 'Crumlin Small Christian Community' and capture how each member is encouraged to play a role in the leadership of their community at each new phase of its evolution. Connell recalls how their group clearly defined a way of organising their activities from the start and elected their own leadership team of three people that alternated between members from year to year. Connell maintains that the team of leaders become like "a smaller community within the community", planning meetings together and prioritising whatever issues or topics are pertinent to the group at any given time. Interestingly, their community encouraged at least one member of the leadership team to continue into the next term to ensure that there was a natural succession from one team to the next. Connell recalls how each member of the team essentially took on responsibilities that corresponded to their own skills and talents; some organised guest speakers to address the group on issues the team felt were important to the community, some prepared spiritual events for the group, some explored new initiatives in the area of social justice, some co-ordinated the programme of Gospel reflection over the year so that everyone had the opportunity to lead the meeting at some point and some sourced new music to inspire the community on their spiritual journey. Essentially, each member of the leadership team took on a role that reflected their own unique gifts in that area. Peelo comments on the vital contribution each new team of co-ordinators made to the life of the community:

The co-ordinators were the engine driving the community forward, planning activities that challenged the group and always mindful of the importance of encouraging small, quiet opportunities for prayer and discussion. They were never on a crusade to change the world but always galvanised the group to identify projects or campaigns that would enable us to respond to the suffering of others in meaningful ways.

Peelo cautions that moments will invariably happen that will test the resolve and solidarity of a small Christian community. Peelo reveals how their "crisis time" brought the group even closer: "Because they had been through something so troubling and painful together, they overcame their hurt and their sense of failure and moved on together, a little bruised but even more resolute in their convictions." It is important to recognise that this model of

Church is not without its limitations. Given that each community is autonomous and exists independently from other communities, there is no real support mechanism from outside the community when things go wrong. In this case, Peelo reveals that an issue arose that divided their group down the middle and it was almost impossible to come to a resolution that satisfied both sides. The result; 6 members felt they could no longer remain in the community and opted to leave. When problems arise, as they inevitably will, it can prove difficult to resolve them without rupturing the balance and cohesion of the group. Each small Christian community essentially runs itself and this leaves the group dynamics very exposed to the potential for one person to create tension and division within the group. The difficulty here is reconciling the need for strong leadership so that no one person can destabilise the unity and cohesion of the community with the need to give everyone in the group an opportunity to influence the life of the community. Dorr suggests that there will always be differences of opinions or issues that surface that will test the unity of the group and that a good team of leaders can hold people together during “the darker days”. At times strong leadership is needed, he insists, to help heal division, to promote new understandings on matters of religious or social importance and to ensure that no person is isolated within the community. Above all, Dorr insists, good leadership helps a small Christian community to preserve its core purpose irrespective of the difficulties the community may encounter along the way. Dorr urges leaders in small Christian communities not to have pre-conceptions about who will have insights within the group and to realise that a common vision or goal will only come when all members are listened to. In his view, a good team of leaders will never lose sight of the contribution of each member to the life of the community and the ability of the “unlikely person” to communicate important truths that might otherwise remain unspoken:

So the ‘word’ God speaks to this group- that is, the fundamental truth which they most need to hear- is at times mediated through a member of the group whose contribution is quite likely to be overlooked or undervalued... This ‘unlikely’ person puts forward the real challenge, or offers a word of wisdom which touches people in their hearts more than at a ‘head’ level... Sometimes the other members of the group have great difficulty in ‘hearing’ such a voice, precisely because they would never expect this rather marginal person to be a channel for prophetic truth. (Dorr, 2004:47-48)

5.5 Concluding Remarks

Small Christian communities owe their origins to the creative vision of people who have discovered in the unique witness of people on the margins of society those very qualities needed to propel the Church forward at this time. One such pioneer of this model of Church is the founder ‘ATD Fourth World’, Joseph Wresinski, and his reflections in *The Poor are the Church* (2002) have helped to crystallise the core findings that have emerged through this chapter. This chapter draws its inspiration from the wisdom of people who are grounding theological inquiry in the concrete realities of our time and articulating the need for a new vision of Church in light of the intolerable social conditions which those on the fringes of society have to endure: “What other path is there for a theology? We have to draw our reflection, as well as our practice, from the experience of the poorest people, not from an idea that we have of their existence but from the reality of their daily lives” (Wresinski, 2002:161). Wresinski insists that no matter how much despair prevails in the Church at a time of crisis, the people will ultimately determine the future path that the Church must traverse if the Church is to more accurately reflect the vision and values of the Gospel: “The Church must look for them and carry them within itself. It must listen to them and let itself be transformed by them” (Wresinski, 2002:38-39). Essentially, Wresinski is convinced that something more than the traditional understanding of Church is required; something that is rooted in, and supported by, clusters of committed Christians who are prepared to put time and effort into improving the wellbeing of those whose plight remains hidden in the shadows of society:

I have stated all along the wish that haunts me: that the Church identify with the dreadful and repulsive poverty of our time; that it identify anew with itself, winning the love of the poorest and transmitting this love to the world... But the Church can and must let itself be invaded. It can let itself be forced to reinvent ways to love the poorest... so that they know that love is possible and that it brings freedom. (Wresinski, 2002:177)

The originality of this chapter lies in the symmetry that is achieved between theology and practice, allowing the researcher to reach a deeper level of insight into the intricacies involved in translating the ecclesiological vision under review into a uniquely Irish setting. The findings that emerge through this phase of the inquiry offer a probing appraisal of the momentum for reform that is being generated at the grassroots of the Church in Ireland.

Critical reflection on the activities of these communities provides the gateway to a new enlightened response to the opportunities this ecclesial dynamic presents to the wider Church community. The research identifies the core principles that are integral to the process of re-configuring what it means to be Church in Ireland today, which, in turn, can be adapted to idiosyncracies unique to each new community. As such, the guidelines that are proposed are not a blueprint for reform; rather a yardstick by which genuine renewal in the Church here can be measured. They reflect the resolve of increasing numbers of people here to signal a new point of departure for the Irish Church so that it begins to give authentic witness to message it seeks to proclaim.

The resounding message articulated by Irish social justice activists here is that the institutional Church needs to shift focus and recognise that the source of its renewal lies in the indomitable spirit and creativity of its people. Section 5.2.1 (pp.213-222) reveals how some social justice activists maintain that this goal is best accomplished by transforming the Church ‘from within’ and providing the stimulus for people to promote change without severing their ties with the current ecclesial framework. Others argue that real reform necessitates a new momentum ‘from outside’ the current dynamic if it is to be effectual. All are unequivocal in their conviction that the Church in Ireland has reached an impasse and that a radical reversal from the traditional hierarchical mindset is required if the credibility of the Church here is to be restored. The question this theme poses is clear; has the time come for the hierarchy here to signify their willingness to open up the internal dynamics of governance of the Church so that the people, in consultation with their leaders, can breathe new life into the mission of the Church? Section 5.2.2 (pp.222-227) acclaims the emergence of grassroots communities on the fringes of the institutional Church. The social justice activists find evidence of a new ecclesial paradigm slowly emerging that enables people to reflect on the Gospel in light of their own experience and to give witness to the liberating power of the Word through their solidarity with the oppressed. These communities open up the dynamic of Church to the people and encourage those once consigned to the sidelines of the Church to re-claim their place as central participants in the life of their local faith community. Bishop Donal Murray recognises the importance of promoting a new orientation for the Church in Ireland today that breaks down the traditional divisions between the clergy and the people so that collectively they can become a force for genuine renewal:

... if Christian faith is to survive in Ireland we all have to be involved in sharing the Good News with others and with a new generation... The challenge is not just to the clergy, it is to every member of the church. Until we all recognise that, we will be missing the real nature of the parish and of the church; and we will be failing to recognise and respond to the challenge we face. (Murray, 2010:81)

Section 5.3.1 (pp.231-235) captures how parish cell communities provide a template for a new alliance between the institutional Church and grassroots Christian communities, one that allows each community to retain its autonomy and independence yet draw on the support mechanism provided by the wider Church community. Each community is animated by creative and spiritual energies of its members and testifies to the continuous activity of the Spirit in the world today. The Word becomes the gateway to the world of the Spirit and enables those who reflect on the Gospel to become more susceptible to God's ongoing involvement in their lives. As such, each cell creates the conditions for people to experience a more intimate and more meaningful experience of Church. 'The Parish Cell System of Evangelisation' is founded on the premise that each cell contains within itself something of the universal Church and the collective movement of over 150 cells in Ireland today heralds the arrival of a new era of opportunity for the Church here. Section 5.3.2 (pp.236-243) captures how solidarity with the poor is intrinsic to the identity of a small Christian community. The small Christian community differs from a prayer group in one significant regard; members recognise that they cannot shield themselves from the suffering and persecution of the downtrodden of society but must stand side by side with them and work towards a new era of justice and liberation. The social justice activists underline how communities that empower the poor to become protagonists in their own history will in turn draw on their reserves of compassion and love and be inspired by all that they encounter among the poor. Section 5.3.3 (pp.244-248) sheds light on the distinctive dynamics of the liberative praxis that is central to life of a small Christian community. Small Christian communities bridge the chasm between scriptural reflection and the pressing day to day realities that members have to contend with. The significance of the Word is not arrived at in isolation from world but reflects the questions and the insights that each person brings to the Word. Section 5.3.4 (pp.248-253) underscores the indivisible union between the activity of each small Christian community and the ongoing movement of God's kingdom and identifies how closeness to the poor draws each community into the vast expanse of the God's love. The inference is clear; the

promotion of the kingdom and not the preservation of the prevailing model of Church becomes the new barometer by which small Christian communities measure the authenticity of their efforts to give witness to the Gospels in the world today.

Theme 3 (Section 5.4, pp.253-274) offers practical guidelines to assist in the promotion of small Christian communities in Ireland and reinforces the intrinsic connection between reflection and action that is the hallmark of this research. Small Christian communities emerge out of the creative vision of people who recognise that the future of the Church must draw its sustenance from the intrinsic solidarity and goodwill that is palpable in many diverse groups and organisations in the wider social community. Those committed to introducing people to the unique appeal of the model of small Christian community need to distinguish between the apathy that exists for the institutional Church and the interest that exists among growing numbers of people here exploring more meaningful ways of giving expression to the Christian story in cut and thrust of their lives. Social justice groups, meditation groups, Gospel choirs, Taizé groups, ecological movements all reflect a movement away from the constraints of the traditional Church structures that have narrowed the ambit of Christian ministry in the past. Promoting the dynamic of small Christian community necessitates a willingness to project beyond the traditional boundaries of Church and ‘tap into’ the eclectic energies that exist among the many diverse groups that are already contributing to the advancement of all that is good in their local community. Moreover, any proposed workshop needs to create an environment where people are listening to and where their activities in the wider social arena are viewed in the context of the new, emerging face of Church being proposed. The interventions defined by the Action Learning Set underline the need to create an opening for spiritual reflection within the dynamics of each new community so that members become more attuned to God’s ongoing involvement in their lives. Small Christian communities, once formed, are sustained from within but project outwards and devise ways of alleviating suffering and injustice beyond the immediate confines of their group. Communities are encouraged to identify their own distinctive ‘burning issue’ so that reflection on the Word becomes the stimulus for transformative action. The inquiry highlights how leadership in a small Christian community is not the prerogative of any one person but rather the shared responsibility of everyone. The destiny of a small Christian community is not pre-determined from the start but evolves naturally over time in correspondence with the distinctive pool of wisdom and energy available to each new community. Ultimately, it is

the people and not the structures that give each community the direction and sense of purpose needed to navigate through new, uncharted waters:

From the outset, there is one fundamental point that has to be made regarding the ordering of small Christian community. The organisation is for people, not people for the organisation. By this we mean that if the structures employed by a group do not help the participants in their efforts to relate to one another, they must be looked at seriously and, when necessary, changed. Persons must come first. (O' Halloran, 2010:74)

Chapter 6: Concluding Discussions

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6.1 Overview

This chapter revisits the original objectives of this research and identifies the core findings that have emerged through this inquiry. The emphasis then turns to examining the implications of this emerging paradigm of Church for the Church in Ireland today. The limitations of the research are outlined and future research directions are presented.

6.2 Research Objectives Re-Visited

The primary research objective outlined in Section 1.2 is to explore the ecclesiology in the theology of liberation with a view to providing a theological rationale to underscore each distinctive element in the paradigm of Base Christian Community. The originality of this thesis lies in the symmetry that exists between theological reflection and the lived expression of core theological themes. This inquiry is built on the premise that the ecclesiological vision animating these grassroots communities arises out of the creative dynamism of the people as they signal a new way of being Church in the world today. A defining feature of the review of literature is that the ambit is widened to encompass the views of Western theologians and Irish social justice activists on the themes that emerged from the selected theologians of liberation under review. Liberation Theology provides a theological under-layer to this emerging model of Church and captures the core theological convictions that underpin the identity of a Base Christian Community. Western progressivist theology reflects a corresponding movement in Western theological inquiry towards an ecclesiological dynamic that draws the Church closer to its source and closer to its people. Of particular importance to this research is the contribution of social justice activists in Ireland in providing a distinctively Irish lens through which these themes could be viewed. The insights garnered from the case studies of 10 social justice activists provide a probing appraisal of potential of the model of this emerging ecclesial paradigm to give renewed direction and meaning to the activity of the Church in Ireland today. Ethnographic research among existing members of 3 small Christian communities in Ireland and 2 social justice groups offer a unique perspective on the transferability of the ecclesial dynamic under review to an Irish context. The interventions defined by the Action Learning Set in their endeavour to give impetus to the promotion of a small

Christian community in Waterford affords the researcher the opportunity to reflect on the intricacies involved in breathing life into this dynamic of Church here.

The uniqueness of this inquiry hinges on the essential interplay between the diverse theological perspectives that are presented in this research and the correlation that exists between the varied avenues of inquiry provides a sound theological platform on which to examine the distinctive features of a Base Christian Community. Figure 6.1 (p.287) endeavours to crystallise the findings that emerged over the course of this research and reveals the extent to which each individual layer of theological inquiry is integral to the process of realising the goals that were set at the outset of this research. In effect, the research moves from the core outwards, from establishing the distinctive elements of the model of Church promoted in Liberation Theology to exploring the theological premise on which the Base Christian Communities are founded from the perspective of the 3 avenues of inquiry under review. The recurring themes that emerged through the inquiry are pooled into distinct ‘meaning sets’, and, through this process, the researcher arrives at a clearer understanding of the theological backdrop to these communities and how this paradigm of Church can translate into an Irish setting. This allows the researcher to decipher the patterns that exist between each distinct strand of inquiry (See Burnard, Lonergan and Eisenhardt in Section 2.4.4, pp.29-32). In so doing, this cognitive map establishes how the model of Base Christian Community becomes the reference point for this research and the inquiry that follows endeavours to elucidate the relevance and significance of this emerging paradigm of Christian community beyond the place of its genesis.

Liberation Theology has set a new process of theological inquiry in motion, one that gives a voice to the voiceless and the marginalised and encourages those at the ‘base’ of the existing ecclesial structures to inject new life into the Church’s mission in the world today. The selected theologians of liberation acclaim the momentum that is gathering at the grassroots among people who see themselves as subjects in their own history, resolute in their struggle for justice and freedom and determined to make their presence felt in the world (See Section 3.2.2, pp.86-94). Rahner and Moltmann underline how the unique dynamism that is palpable on the periphery of the Church around the world heralds a new day of opportunity for the universal Church (See Section 4.3.2, p.176 and Section 4.4.2, pp.188-190). McGuinness, O’ Halloran, Dorr and Byrne speak of the energy and vitality that is palpable on the fringes of the Catholic Church in Ireland today and emphasise the

importance of harnessing the potential that exists outside the traditional boundaries of the Church (See Section 5.2.2, pp.222-227 and Section 5.4.1, pp.255-259). This research highlights how theology is no longer removed from the peculiarities and challenges of each community but strengthens the resolve of those on the margins to be a force for change in the world. What has evolved is a new orientation in theological emphasis, one that bridges the divide between the present and the future and draws humanity more deeply into the ongoing story of salvation. A recurring theme throughout this inquiry is that the resurgence of the Church at the grassroots is giving renewed impetus to the movement of salvation through history (See Section 3.3.1, pp.95-98 and Section 4.2.3, pp.163-165).

A Base Christian Community essentially affords each member of the faith community the opportunity to channel the presence of the Spirit without mediation. Boff underlines how members of a Base Christian Community are ‘ecclesial subjects’ in their own right and bring their distinctive talents and energies to bear on the life of their community (See Section 3.4.1, pp.104-106). The research underlines how the activity of the Spirit is never exhausted and that Base Christian Communities provide a conduit for God’s Spirit to radiate beyond the traditional confines of Church into the wider social arena. Responsibilities are allocated in accordance with the unique set of gifts at the disposal of the group as leadership is viewed as the function of the entire community rather than the exclusive privilege of one single person. Dulles, Cooke and Fuellenbach capture how each community is propelled forward by the ongoing activity of the Spirit in the world and testify to the potential of the people to create an opening for this life force to pour into the vast array of activities that define the life of the community (See Section 4.3.2, pp.176-183). Russell underlines how these communities are animated by the creative dynamism of women who break free from the oppressive dictates of societal forces that suppress rather than liberate their true potential (See Section 3.4.1, p.106). This view is echoed by Noonan and Ryan who acclaim the role many female co-ordinators have played in invigorating the life of their faith community across Latin America (See Section 5.2.1, p.218). Quinn and Power underline the need for a more inclusive Church in Ireland that draws those once sidelined on the margins into the heart of a new ecclesial dynamic (See Section 5.2.1, pp.216-218). The Leixlip Parish Cell Community capture how each grassroots cell is energised from within by the gifts and potentialities unique to each cell and reverberates outwards to impact on the wider parish community (See Section 5.3.1, pp.232-235). Both Boff and O’ Halloran draw a parallel between the symmetry that exists between each

strand of the Trinity and the indivisible unity that exists between each Base Christian Community (See Boff in Section 3.4.1, pp.107-110 and O' Halloran in Section 5.3.1, pp.231-232). The resounding message through this inquiry is that the grassroots and the institutional Church can co-exist and that each Base Christian Community forms part of a wider network of Christian communities that can rejuvenate the activity of the Church in the world today.

Base Christian Communities are defined by their solidarity with the poor and create the conditions for those once alienated on the margins of society to exert a transforming influence in their surroundings. Liberation Theology is founded on the belief that the incorrigible resolve of the poor to create more equitable social conditions for their families and their communities has a significance that transcends the immediacy of their historical situation (See Section 3.2.2, pp.86-94). Through their compassion for those who are most impoverished, these communities reveal the liberating power of God's love into the world (See Section 3.4.4, pp.131-134). Vanier and Wresinski reiterate this view and underlines how closeness to the poor draws humanity deeper into the mystery of God's love (See Section 4.2.1, pp.158-159). Grace now becomes a redemptive force in civilisation, compelling Christians to embrace the needs of those most impoverished in their midst, and, in so doing, open the pores of history to the sustaining power of God's love (See Section 3.4.4, pp.128-130 and Section 4.2.3, pp.165-168). Within this ecclesiological framework, the Church becomes a 'sacramental community' and embodies the living presence of its source in its service to those who are persecuted and suffering in the world (See Section, 3.3.2, pp.98-101). Section 5.3.2 (pp.236-243) translates the implications of this preferential option for the poor into an Irish setting and reveals how each small Christian community draws its sustenance from all that it encounters among the poor. The diverse strands of theological inquiry through this thesis combine to present a clear and unequivocal challenge to Christians throughout the world; the Church can no longer stand idly by and remain impartial to the suffering of the poor but must become embedded in the struggles of its people and walk alongside them in their pursuit of justice. Ultimately, the efficacy of each community is measured in terms of its capacity to inject new hope into their immediate surroundings and empower people to become bearers of this hope.

This thesis captures the centrality of the Gospel to the life of a Base Christian Community. Each Base Christian community effectively places theology back in the hands of the

people and bridges the divide between the world of the Gospel and the pressing challenge unique to each new time and place. Liberation Theology puts a spotlight on how the unique style of Christian witness that is promoted in Base Christian Communities advances the movement of the kingdom in the world today. Section 3.4.2 (pp.112-120) examines the distinctive hermeneutics of the liberative praxis reverberating through communities of the poor across Latin America. Western progressivist theology emphasises how the meaning of Word only becomes apparent in the process of actualising the significance of the Word in the world of everyday and that Christian praxis provides a framework that makes it possible to contribute to the unfolding of the kingdom in each new historical context (See Section 4.4.1, pp.184-188 and Section 4.4.3, pp.193-194). The Fig Tree Group in Fatima Mansions, Dublin reveal how their members reflect on the pressing social realities that they have to contend with in light of the inspiration they draw from the Gospel (See Section 5.3.3, pp.245-246). The exploration of a Gospel passage in a small Christian community does not follow a prescribed and preordained route but now very much reflects the rich and varied responses that each person ascribes to the passage. This symmetry between the Word and the experience each member brings to the Word opens the group up to the vast expanse of inspiration that lies within the lines of the Gospel passage. The Action Learning Set re-enforce the importance of Christian praxis to the identity of a small Christian community (See Section 5.4.3, pp.269-271). Each Base Christian Community forges an indivisible union between reflection on the Word and the lived expression of the Word, and, in so doing, releases the liberating power of the Gospel into the everyday world of its members.

Base Christian Communities create a new consciousness among the people of the root causes of their oppression and facilitates a process of critical inquiry that enables them to anticipate the possibilities that exist beyond the prevailing social order. Liberation Theology retrieves the prophetic identity of the Church in the world today and offers a clear and unambiguous rebuke of the oppressive forces that bind the poor to their impoverished conditions (See Section 3.4.3, pp.120-128). Western progressivist theology views each Base Christian Community as a ‘contrast society’ that denounces what is unjust and unacceptable in their midst and gives hope to people subjected to intolerable social conditions. Brueggemann underlines the role prophetic leaders can play in projecting beyond the insular boundaries of the existing societal norms and envisaging a new path for their community that generates renewed optimism into their social environs (See Section

4.4.2, pp.191-192). Fuellenbach and Rahner maintain that Base Christian communities must provide a space for people to draw on their reserves of compassion and love and live in accordance with values that are stifled rather than encouraged in Western civilisation (See 4.4.2, pp.188-190). McVerry underlines the importance of questioning the dominant ideologies of today and promoting an alternative to the individualism and competitiveness that is prevalent in Irish society (See Section 5.2.2, p.226 and Section 5.3.2, pp.236-237). Each Base Christian Community is counter cultural and proposes an alternative vision of community that reflects the deeper needs and aspirations of its members.

Within a Base Christian Community, leadership is no longer the exclusive privilege of a select few but the shared responsibility of all members of the community. The people can provide the 'creative spark' needed to activate the change that is needed in the Church and rejuvenate its mission in the world. Boff reveals how each Base Christian Community divides the various responsibilities into ministries that are allocated in accordance with the individual gifts and talents of members (See Section 3.4.1, p.105). Western progressive theologians see a decisive shift in how these communities understand ministry how each specific ministry is animated by the combined efforts of the community leader and the ministry leader who has specialised skills suited to the distinctive requirements of that ministry (See Section 4.3.2, pp.176-183). The Action Learning Set stress the need to promote a dynamic of shared leadership that liberates rather than stifles the potential of people to play an active role in the life of their faith community (See Section 5.4.3, pp.271-273). The theologians of liberation underline how, within the current hierarchical model, the people are effectively silenced and consigned to the periphery of the life of the Church (See Section 3.2.1, pp.81-86). The central challenge Liberation Theology presents to the Church is clear; if it is to reconcile its mission in the world with the vision of the Gospel and become a source of hope for the poor and the persecuted, the Church must first critique the limitations of its own structures. The Western progressive theologians and Irish social justice activists offer a critique of the shortcomings of the traditional paradigm of Church and reiterate the need to re-configure how the Church operates in the world today (Section 4.3.1, pp.169-176 and Section, 5.2.1, pp. 213-222). Each diverse avenue of theological inquiry combine to underscore the importance of empowering the laity to play a decisive role in delineating a new way forward for the universal Church.



Legend:

- Features of Community: ■
- Liberation Theology: ■
- Western Progressivist Theology: ■
- Irish Perspective: ■

Figure 6.1 Summary of findings

6.3 Examining the Implications of this Research for the Church in Ireland

This thesis examines how the unique ecclesiological vision that underpins the model of Base Christian Community resonates beyond the time and place of its genesis and offers renewed hope to the activity of the Church in Ireland today. O' Hanlon views the current crisis as an opportunity "to imagine something different, new, more faithful to Vatican II and to the New Testament" (O' Hanlon, 2011:94). The path towards renewal, if it is to be effective, necessitates a radical transformation in how the Church has traditionally operated. Mannion cautions against futile attempts to make new visions "fit into outdated, ill-suited, or unworkable ecclesial forms, policies and structures" (Mannion, 2007:194). Base Christian Communities have evolved out of the vision and resilience of people on the sidelines of the Church and their capacity to anticipate possibilities beyond the present ecclesial dynamic that more adequately reflects their needs and aspirations. Boff reflects on the importance of channelling the collective vision of the people in ways that can have a transformative impact on the Church's mission in the world: "History has rarely produced examples of an institution that is conservative by nature and easily adapted to the status quo becoming prophetic and promoting actions to transform society" (Boff, 2002:80). Michael Murphy, deceased bishop of Cork and Ross diocese, alludes to how the creative vision of people at the 'base' of the Church in Latin America had transformed "a Church that was demoralised, used by special interests, dependent, irrelevant to the majority, and despised by many" into "a revitalised Church, moving more and more towards independence, leaning towards the poor and oppressed... with renewed confidence and involved in the lives of all" (Murphy, 1980:654). O' Hanlon recognises the potential for people at the grassroots here to provide the stimulus for a corresponding resurgence in the Church in Ireland, believing that "out of the wreck of a defensive, conformist, clerical culture, a new pattern of being church is emerging" (O' Hanlon, 2011:83). The researcher concurs with O' Halloran who believes that the vision of Church that underscores the activities of Base Christian Communities around the world today "is not simply another pastoral strategy; it really is at the core of everything we aspire to in life" (O' Halloran, 2010:35-36).

The movement of the Church draws its sustenance from the creative energies of its people in each new age. Mannion reminds us that the Church evolves concurrently with the efforts of its people to advance in their time and place God's intentions for humanity: "The church is forever moving forward and must always explore new ways to bring the love of God into other's lives. The church is, indeed, a community in constant renewal" (Mannion, 2007:209). The impetus for renewal is most keenly felt on the fringes of the Church here in the resolve of a growing number of Irish Catholics to put their own imprint on the dynamic of Church that they want to belong to. In a recently undertaken ecumenical research project, Ganiel discovered that increasing numbers of Catholics in Ireland are turning to 'extra-institutional spaces' and venturing outside the existing ecclesial walls in search of something more meaningful and more relevant. Ganiel explains that "these people did not turn to the traditional organs of the institutional Church for help in growing their faith" but discovered in the myriad of new meditation practices and social justice projects the kind of spiritual sustenance that "they had not encountered in the Catholic parishes and schools which they had attended previously" (Ganiel, 2012:43). While the people interviewed did not see these 'spaces' as part of the institutional Church, Ganiel believes that the insights and perspectives they have gained could "with the right opportunities and nurturing, contribute to wider discussions about reform with the institutional Church" (Ganiel, 2012:46). In *Seeds of a New Church* (1994), O' Brien, recognises the need for the Catholic Church here to align itself more closely with the unique dynamism that is palpable in the plethora of social justice groups and small Christian communities on the sidelines of the current structures. The fact this alignment has yet to happen underscores the deep resistance to change within the Church and the reluctance on the part of those in leadership to embrace the possibilities that these communities present. O'Brien's comments retain their relevance and significance almost two decades later:

If we live in an age of changing values, then it is also an age of spiritual searching. Even as one model of church declines, another grows; as one way of doing things collapses another takes on life. As disillusionment grows with the institutionalisation of the church, some may give up on it but others search and struggle for other ways to be Christian community and to challenge the wider church to renew itself by forming communities, more real, more living and more relevant. (O' Brien, 1994:34)

Within the constraints of the traditional ecclesial structures everything is orchestrated from Rome and the scope of the Church's mission in the world is very much limited to what the hierarchy dictates. A recurring theme in this research is that the Church will only discover its true identity when it breaks the cycle of allegiance to the prevailing ecclesial order and begins to respond to the challenges unique to each new age. The Church is not removed from the world but evolves in correspondence with the world and articulates its message in light of the changing vagaries of society. The 'Shaping Ireland's Future' Report compiled by Social Justice Ireland (2012) reflects on the deep-rooted malaise that exists at the heart of contemporary Irish culture. Within this culture, the report suggests, people are drawn into a whirlpool of competitiveness from which there can seem no way out:

The autonomous individual championed in much current economic theory becomes caught in a never satisfied quest for achievement that ultimately produces a bottomless pit of anxiety... The individual experiencing anxiety often responds by seeking to get more, to have more, so as to control the future... a route out of this morass is needed. (Social Justice Ireland, 2012:35)

This inquiry points towards the growing numbers of Catholics here who are exploring alternatives to the anomalies of society and are turning to smaller communities of faith, many with an ecological or social justice dimension, in search of meaning and spiritual enlightenment. McVerry pinpoints the appeal of these communities for many people in Ireland today who find themselves progressively more alienated in a society that accentuates individualism and material gain over all other considerations: "The love of God for us is mediated through community, through the love of others for us... It is in the solidarity with each other in community, in the relationships which we build with each other in community, that we find both fulfilment and security" (McVerry, 2006:72). O'Brien believes that the Church must become synonymous with the process of social transformation by "promoting it, giving it a clearer focus, sustaining it with a humanising vision and spiritual depth, and redefining its goals in terms of a more inclusive compassion and a more solid grasp of what is real and true" (O'Brien, 1994:199). The new expressions of Christian faith communities that are emerging around the country indicate the extent to which the people are already taking the lead in this regard.

Liberative praxis provides a framework for a new spiritual emphasis that re-orientates the Church closer to its source and to its people. O' Hanlon reflects on the importance of creating a new dynamic in Christian witness that reconciles the activity of the Church with

the pressing concerns that each new generation have to contend with: “We need as Church to root ourselves deeply in the soil of a dynamic, action-oriented prayer and spirituality” (O’ Hanlon, 2011:96). A Church embedded in the struggles of its people will discover in the humanity and spirit of its people those very qualities needed to sustain it as it evolves. The shift in focus is significant here. In its solidarity with those who are voiceless and marginalised in society and its unequivocal commitment to social justice, the Church opens the pores of the institution to the vibrancy and resilience of its people. Boff captures this succinctly: “They are directed by a new mode of living and of acting, by a new perception of reality and by a new experience of being. They emerge from a collective path, a path that is being made as we walk” (Boff, 2007:10). Pope Francis underlines how St. Francis epitomises the journey the Church must embark on if it is to embody within its structures the message it seeks to proclaim to the world: “For me, he is the man of poverty, the man of peace, the man who loves and safeguards Creation... He is the man who gives us the spirit of peace, the poor man... Oh, how I wish for a Church that is poor and for the poor” (Pope Francis, 2013:1). Pope Francis recognises, as St. Francis did, that the Church’s mission in the world takes on a new meaning when viewed against a wider ecological backdrop where concern for each strand of created reality contributes to the wellbeing of the whole. Social Justice Ireland underlines the indivisible unity between all living matter and the need for more people to reach out beyond the relative sanctuary of their own lives and respond to the needs of those most impoverished in their midst:

To ensure that the connectedness of the web of life is maintained, each person, depending on age and ability, is expected to reach out and support others in ways that are appropriate for their growth and in harmony with the rest of creation. This thinking respects the integrity of the person, while recognising that the person can achieve his or her potential only in right relationships with others and the environment. (Social Justice Ireland, 2012:269)

Consultation and dialogue are the essential first steps on the path towards renewal in the Catholic Church. The research highlights how the existing disparity between the laity and the priesthood needs to be replaced by something more inclusive and more representative of the people. Mannion argues that the process of reforming the Church needs to be a joint initiative between the clergy and the people so that “the laity can play a significant role in building a future for the church that is vibrant, participation-oriented, and liberative” (Mannion, 2007:199). The Association of Catholic Priests (ACP) is contributing

significantly to promoting a new climate of collaboration and dialogue in the Catholic Church in Ireland. Whilst the hierarchy is reluctant to endorse this movement towards ecclesial renewal, the ACP remains committed to “restructuring the governing system of the Church, basing it on service rather than on power, and encouraging at every level a culture of consultation and transparency” (Association of Catholic Priests, 2012). As a result of an open forum held in Dublin in May, 2012, a steering group was formed to develop a policy framework for a new ‘Lay Umbrella Organisation’ with the intention of working alongside the ACP, advocating an agenda of reform in the Irish Church that reflects the vision and teaching of Vatican 11. Would it not be more effective sign of change, and more consistent with the spirit of Vatican 11, to form one single organisation that created the conditions for the laity and the priesthood to work together in pursuit of a more inclusive Church? If the future of laity and of the Church are to be positive, fresh thinking is needed in all sectors of the Church, as well as shared leadership in ministry and governance. Dorr captures this succinctly: “Local bishops and priests can pioneer new ways within their own spheres of activity” so that “the priests and the pastoral workers in clusters of parishes should work closely together as a team” (Dorr, 2011:7).

The paradigm of Church explored in this inquiry is mobilised by the dynamism and energies of their co-ordinators, many of them women, and testify to the importance of encouraging those once consigned to the periphery of the Church to play a central role in the life of the Church today. Has the time come to dismantle the traditional divisions in the Church and allow lay pastoral leaders, male and female, with proven discipleship to their local parish communities to be ordained by their Bishops so that they can partake in the celebration of the Eucharist? The researcher concurs with O’ Hanlon who argues that “the status quo is both untenable and unconscionable and, if not addressed, will leave the church as an enclave hospitable to traditionalists only” (O’ Hanlon, 2011:77). There are signs that the process of change is slowly starting to evolve. Bill Murphy, Bishop of Kerry, calls for a new alliance between Church leaders here and the people and underlines his own commitment to the “empowerment of lay people based on real collaboration at all levels and the inclusion of women in the decision-making in our diocese” (Murphy in O’ Hanlon, 2011:100). Redmond reflects on how this inclusion of the people in the governance of their local parish community has a profound impact on how the laity view their role within the Church: “It is a totally new experience for parishioners to be asked for suggested actions, even to mandate a parish meeting. Once the process starts, however, I

suspect that most feel that change has begun” (Redmond, 2011:74). McKenzie’s comments post Vatican 11 are particularly pertinent in this regard: “When the laity become aware that the decision of what they can do and must do lies with them, they will do it” (McKenzie, 1966:124). The future of the Church needs to be defined by the people in consultation with their leaders so that together they can delineate a new path for the universal Church. Pope Francis captures the challenge this presents to those in positions of authority within the Church the world over:

The people of God want pastors, not clergy acting like bureaucrats or government officials. The bishops, particularly, want to be able to support the movement of God among their people with patience, so that no one is left behind. But they must also be able to accompany the flock that has the flair for finding new paths... that takes audacity and courage. (Pope Francis, 2013:7)

6.4 Potential Weaknesses in this Emerging Paradigm of Church

Small Christian communities, once established, can easily drift into its own established routine and slowly disconnect from the vision and sense of purpose that propelled the community forward at the beginning. Boff cautions against these communities becoming somewhat settled in their ways and losing the initial zeal and enthusiasm that they started out with and views each community as an evolving dynamic that “emerges, is born, and is continually reshaped” (Boff, 1985:127). Boff believes that these communities must project beyond themselves and bring their influence to bear on changing the society that has relegated them to the margins: “The base ecclesial community must not be satisfied with its progress within the prison; it must begin the lengthy process by which the prison no longer exists” (Boff, 1985:15). Small Christian communities must create safeguards that ensure they constantly evolve as a community and remain cognisant of their responsibilities in the wider social arena. The ‘Edmund Rice Small Christian Community’ have explored ways of reaching out to the marginalised in their locality and are currently organising an educational programme to equip people from disadvantaged areas of the city with the necessary skills to help them to find employment. Through this outreach, the community ensures that the spirituality of its members finds expression in the promotion of social justice in the wider social arena. Small Christian communities that emphasise prayer at the expense of Christian praxis run the risk of becoming insular and removed from the realities of persecution and suffering that others beyond their immediate confines

have to endure. In Section 4.4.3 (p.196), Fuellenbach too alludes to the importance of aligning our lives with ‘the burning centre’ of history and continually deciphering ways of contributing to the unfolding of the kingdom in each new time and place. Unless a small Christian community has this ‘internal mechanism’ that encourages a ‘critical spirit’ within its own dynamic, its members can easily compromise the identity of their community and surrender their burning passion to become a force for change in the world.

It is clear that the dynamism of a small Christian community very much depends on the prophetic vision of its leader to ensure that each community remains true to its course. Communities can get so fixated with sharing the leadership that they run the risk of becoming rudderless and bereft of the impetus necessary to move forward with confidence. In Section 4.4.2 (p.192), Schillebeeckx underlines how leaders need to retain a certain detachment and remain ‘significantly different’ to the rest if they are to envisage a goal or ideal that the community can aspire towards. The vision of the leader helps to map out previously unexplored possibilities for their community. The question remains; how do you reconcile attributing greater responsibility to one person endowed with special spiritual intuition without undermining the contribution that all members can make to their community? Strikingly, Noonan and Ryan speak passionately about how the Base Christian Communities that they experienced in Brazil entrusted women and men from their communities with special responsibilities. The people elected individuals with a proven record of commitment to their community to serve as the co-ordinators to their communities. What is critical here is that the people themselves decide on their leader as distinct from having this selection imposed on them from outside their confines. In Section 5.2.1 (p.218), it is clear that Noonan and Ryan believe that the energy and dynamism that is palpable in these communities filters down from the co-ordinators through to all members of the community. These men and women are selfless in their efforts to mobilise the people to become a potent force for change. They have an instinctive ability to harness the shared talents of the group and motivate the people to embrace a shared vision. In Section 4.3.2 (p.180), Fuellenbach underlines how good leaders have the capacity to create a team of leaders in each area of ministry within the life of a community. It is not about holding on to power but distributing power so that the contribution of each member is intrinsic to the life and vitality of their community. Small Christian communities must strike a balance between encouraging shared leadership and promoting the special gifts and talents of individuals within the community. Good leaders can work away seamlessly

in the background, encouraging each member to find their voice and harnessing the skills and talents at their disposal for the wellbeing of all members of their community.

Small Christian communities can often find themselves isolated in the world and in need of a sense of belonging to a wider network of communities. Peelo recalls a time of discord and acrimony in the 'Crumlin Small Christian Community' when they could have benefitted from having a wider mechanism of support to steer them through that difficult time (See Section 5.5.3, pp.273-274). The reality is that each small Christian community is very much autonomous and exists independently of each other. Exploring the emergence of small Christian communities across Latin America, it became clear how each community very much thrived on the alliances they forged with the wider Church community. In places where the hierarchy embraced this paradigm of Church, initiatives were organised aimed at supporting the people at local level to take ownership of their own communities. The pastoral agent played a key role, organising diocesan workshops for the co-ordinators from each Base Christian Community (See Section 3.4.1, pp.109-110 and Section 5.2.1, p.220). The pastoral agent provided a vital connection between the Church and these communities, sharing resources and educating programmes that they could pass on to their members, imparting new skills and training to empower these leaders in their work and conducting retreats for them to help them in their own spiritual development. The dynamism generated in these workshops percolated back into the life of each community. In a sense, the hierarchy provided a vital support structure to help these communities exist. What happens then when that mechanism no longer exists?

McVerry and Doyle fear that given the obvious reluctance of the hierarchy here to embrace anything new, the momentum that these communities offer to the Church's mission will ultimately be stifled (See Section 5.2.1, p.216 and p.220 and Section 5.2.2, p.224-225). The danger is that without encouragement and support from their parishes the impetus that this emerging ecclesial dynamic can bring to the Church will ultimately be subdued. These communities need to feel part of a wider ecclesial framework and discover ways of providing a support network that would promote increased solidarity and co-operation between communities. 'The Parish Cell System of Evangelisation' provides a template that makes this possible creating a dynamic that strengthen the ties between communities within a support network promoted by their local diocese (See Section 5.3.1, pp.231-235). Without this, these communities remain very detached and isolated from

each other and exposed to forces opposed to their existence. Petrella argues that Liberation Theology needs ‘a new historical project’ if it is to respond to the changing vagaries of each new age. (Petrella, 2006:11-16) The researcher believes that theologians of liberation have a role to play in defining effective strategies that can reinforce the essential synergy that exists between Base Christian Communities around the world. Now that the theology has been established, is it time to examine the intricacies involved in consolidating the alliance between these grassroots communities and the wider movement of the universal Church?

6.5 Research Limitations and Possible Directions for Future Research

This thesis underlines the unifying chemistry that exists between small Christian communities the world over and the research would benefit from formulating ways of consolidating a network of small Christian communities within and beyond Ireland. Consideration must be given to devising ways of forging new alliances between small Christian communities. Resources and stories could be shared, new avenues in Christian witness could be explored and communities could become a source of strength and inspiration for each other. These communities can signal a new era in theological inquiry and open up new possibilities for Christian ministry throughout the world. This research points towards the need for an additional support structure for small Christian communities in Ireland. One possibility is to critique the pastoral programmes initiated by the Church in Latin America to help encourage and sustain these communities with a view to envisaging ways in which these strategies could be adapted to an Irish setting. The insights that would be garnered from exploring these programmes in the place of their genesis would be incalculable. The researcher recognises the unique perspective that direct experience with pastoral agents, co-ordinators and members of Base Ecclesial Communities in Latin America would bring to the next stage of this inquiry. The overriding interest lies in examining the feasibility of providing a similar support network for Christian communities in Ireland and assessing the extent to which the strength of this network is determined by the assistance it gets from the institutional Church.

The researcher would like to meet some of the Latin American theologians who have inspired this thesis. Their commitment to giving a voice to those who are marginalised and silenced in the world is matched by their boundless compassion for the poor. These

theologians live among their people and their theology testifies to their unremitting courage in the face of great suffering and persecution. Their legacy will be defined not by their words alone but by their unflinching solidarity with the poor. To meet them personally would serve to further cement the findings that have emerged over the course of this inquiry and provide a unique insight into their unswerving commitment to carving out a new theological vision despite the censure and denunciation that they have had to endure over the decades. The research would be enlightened greatly by their appraisal of the impact Liberation Theology has had on the mission of the Church within and beyond Latin America and their appraisal of the immediate challenges that it poses for the Church today. Equally, it would be important to meet with current theologians of liberation within and beyond Latin America to assess their views on the pressing issues and themes that are impacting on theological inquiry throughout the world.

This dissertation underlines the need to reconcile opposing voices in the Church so that all members of the Church begin to shape and influence its course. It is important to accommodate the dissenting voice and to engage directly with people who believe that the small Christian community would have a divisive rather than unifying impact on the activity of the Church around the world. It is clear that the Church in Ireland is at an important crossroads and that it is in the interest of everyone committed to the Church to navigate new uncharted waters together as a collective unit. Through this process, a new understanding of the importance of the reciprocal alliance between Church structures and the needs of the people could be arrived at. The research that follows could examine the concerns and anxieties of people who owe their allegiance to the traditional model of Church and assess their response to the challenges facing the Church in Ireland today. Equally, those with an openness to change within the prevailing structures of Church could be encouraged to anticipate ways in which the model of small Christian community could breathe new life into the activity of the institutional Church in Ireland today. The primary interest in this new strand of inquiry would be to discover ways of establishing a new synergy between the hierarchy and the people so that together they can pave the way for a new era of renewal in the Church here. Moreover, this research points towards the need for greater dialogue between the different Christian denominations here and illustrates the role small Christian communities can play in healing traditional divisions between the various Christian Churches on this island. The researcher recognises the scope for further research

into the ecumenical implications of the ecclesiology of liberation for the promotion of unity and reconciliation among people once divided by their Christian heritage.

Finally, this research would benefit greatly from engaging in a pilot programme aimed at widening the net of this inquiry further and introducing more people outside the domain of the institutional Church to the model of small Christian community. Whilst this thesis reflects on the potential of the vision of Church articulated in Liberation Theology to rejuvenate the Church in Ireland, the challenge it presents has only just begun. The next step is to broaden the scope of theological inquiry to include ways of translating this theological vision to a wider audience and devising a strategy that opens up this style of Church to more people here. This inquiry is founded on the belief that through the process of listening to the voices of those on the margins, a more liberating vision of Church begins to emerge. As such, this thesis does not attempt to provide all the answers to the problems that beset the Church in Ireland today. Rather, it opens the gateway to further discourse and inquiry and to the reality that renewal in how the Church operates here is possible.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – Interview Protocol

Interviews with social justice activists

Date:

Interviewee:

Your faith and you

What are the core spiritual principles that guide you in life?

To what extent have these principles influenced you in your promotion of social justice?

When you look back on your life, are there defining moments that have left their imprint on the convictions you hold today?

Who do you draw your inspiration from?

The Church and you

Do you feel a sense of belonging to the Catholic Church in Ireland?

Has the institutional Church lost its credibility in Ireland today?

What reform would you propose for the Catholic Church in Ireland? Do you see this happening?

Where do you see signs of hope for the Catholic Church in Ireland at this time?

Your vision of Church

What are the distinctive features of your vision of Church?

Do you see any evidence of this vision becoming a reality in Ireland today?

To what extent has your vision of Church been influenced by Liberation Theology?

Do you think that the model of Base Christian Community can translate into an Irish setting?

Interviews with members of Irish small Christian communities

Date:

Interviewees:

The Church and you

Do you feel a sense of belonging to the Catholic Church in Ireland?

Why do you believe growing numbers of Irish people are disillusioned with the Catholic Church?

What reform would you like to see the hierarchy introduce? Do you think this will happen?

What role can the laity play in advancing the renewal of the Catholic Church in Ireland today?

Your involvement in a small Christian community

What is the appeal of your small Christian community for you?

What are the defining features of your faith community?

To what extent does the activity of your small Christian community filter out into your local parish?

In what ways does your community differ from a prayer group?

Looking to the future

What is your vision of Church?

What steps do you believe are necessary if this ideal is to become a reality?

Do you see your model of Christian community enduring into the future?

Where do you see evidence of hope for the Catholic Church in Ireland today?

Appendix 2 – Action Learning Set Discussions

Appendix 2.1: First meeting of the Action Learning Set

Date: October 8th, 2011

Venue: The Edmund Rice Heritage Centre, Mount Sion, Waterford

Report compiled by Steve Hale

Present: Phil Brennan, Ann Hayes, Eileen Coffey, Barbara Burke, Margaret O'Rathaille, Joe Dalton, Kevin Mascarenhas, Phil Ryan, Steve Hale

Opening phase of the meeting:

Phil opened the meeting with a brief introduction to the background of his research on Base Christian Community. Each member of the team was then invited to introduce themselves and to give a short synopsis of their views on the way forward for the Catholic Church in Ireland today. He presented a series of photographs with accompanying quotations and music that captured the unique qualities of the dynamic of Church that grew to prominence in Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s. (See pp.333-336) The stated aim of our 3 meetings together was then outlined: could the dynamism that has reverberated through communities of the poor across Latin America be replicated here? The team's task was to explore the possibility of devising ways in which the model of Base Christian Community could be adapted to an Irish context. Phil underlined his belief that each participant had something to contribute to these series of meetings and that their views would form a vital component in his research. He emphasised the importance of creating a climate of dialogue and mutual respect within the team so that each person would know that what they had to contribute would be listened to no matter how different their views might be.

Kevin then led the team in the opening prayer, followed by an invitation from Phil to reflect on positive experiences of Church that we have had in the past. Many varied responses surfaced during the discussion that followed:

- Lourdes' experience and outreach
- Cenacle experience in Dublin with "Christian Living Weekend"
- Parish shared leadership experience in the aftermath of Vatican II – a leadership that shares power and the energy that can bring
- Community of Jerusalem in Paris
- Roman Tertianship experience and the "freedom" of the Australians in expressing themselves
- "Corpus Christi" processions as a child
- "Be the Change" – mind boggling and liberating
- "Christian Family Movement (CFM) in Dungarven – with an interaction with the structures of the Church and a strong social justice component
- Visit to Taizé

The team then discussed their views on the challenges facing the institutional Church in Ireland at this time. Each member of the team exchanged ideas and observations and all without exception spoke of their frustration at the pace of reform in the Church today. The

resounding message emanating from this discussion was that the hierarchy's handling of the clerical sex abuse scandal exposed the flaws of the existing structures of Church and demonstrated a clear reluctance on their part to promote a radical 're-think' of the culture and practices that tolerated these crimes. Some argued that the institutional Church had lost its credibility and that an alternative grassroots model of Church was now required that would eliminate the need for hierarchical structures and would become a more humble representation of the vision of community that Jesus intended for His followers. Others suggested that real transformation in how the Church operates in Ireland would only happen when lay people were listened to and encouraged to play a more active role in the governance of the Church here. The general consensus was that the trust between the hierarchy and the people has been severed and that something altogether different to what exists is needed.

Middle phase of the meeting:

Phil then gave a five minute input on the vision of Church promoted in Liberation Theology. The key defining features of the Base Christian Community were clarified: the Gospel and not the dictates of those in the hierarchy is the point of reference for these community; solidarity with those who are on the margins of society is an intrinsic to the identity of each community; the people pool their collective talents for the wellbeing of their entire community and each person has a role to play in the ministry of their faith community. Phil mentioned how this dynamic of Church has its origins in Latin America and has gradually filtering out through many parts of the world. Phil cited Leonardo Boff and James O' Halloran in illustrating the potential of the Base Christian Community to "blaze a new trail" for the universal Church. The team then discussed their response to this emerging dynamic of Church. It was observed that at times the teachings of the Church and the language in which these teachings are couched can create a "disconnectedness" for people and an alienation from an experience of a nourishing community of faith. The "man-made" structures that are used to define "religion" can conflict with the building of Christian faith communities.

Members of the team who had experienced first-hand the unique dynamism of these communities were then given the opportunity to reflect on their experiences. Ann and Joe spoke of the momentum that was being generated in Base Christian Communities in Nigeria and India:

- In Nigeria – small communities come together to share the Word – central, powerful, moves to action – Word is living reality. (Ann)
- In India – example of how effective leadership generated coming together and sharing - sharing which is essential to small Christian communities – giving people ownership. (Joe)

Concluding phase of the meeting:

Phil explained how the team would engage in an Action Research Programme with a view to initiating a small Christian community in Waterford. The team would work together to devise an effective strategy that would make the aspiration of forming a small Christian community in the Edmund Rice Centre a reality. Through this process, we would draw up key guidelines that we deemed central to the growth and development of a small Christian community as it evolves. Phil encouraged us to learn from the experience even if our endeavour did not achieve its intended objective. The new knowledge that we acquired

through this process could provide the stimulus for other groups to promote this model of Church in their own communities.

We then divided into smaller working groups to explore possible strategies that would give impetus to the goal of forming a small Christian community in the city. The following plan of action emerged from the full team discussions that followed: the team would organise a carol service in The Edmund Rice Chapel; Joe would design a poster that would be circulated to local newspapers so that people outside the traditional parameters of the Church were informed of the event; one of the team would give a brief input on small Christian community after the Carol Service and those interested in finding out more would be invited to attend a workshop in the Edmund Rice Centre in mid January; members of an existing small Christian community, The Fig Tree Group in Fatima Mansions, Dublin, would be invited to contribute to this workshop to give the participants the opportunity to experience first-hand the unique dynamics of this model of Church. The meeting finished with a short meditation led by Ann. Generally, the team felt hopeful and enthusiastic about the prospect of working together to form a new small Christian community in Waterford.

Appendix 2.2: Second Meeting of the Action Learning Set

Date: November 26th, 2011

Venue: The Edmund Rice Heritage Centre, Mount Sion, Waterford

Report compiled by Steve Hale

Present: Phil Brennan, Ann Hayes, Eileen Coffey, Barbara Burke, Margaret O'Rathaille, Joe Dalton, Kevin Mascarenhas, Phil Ryan, Steve Hale

Opening phase of the meeting:

The meeting started with an informal discussion on how plans for the forthcoming carol service and workshop were advancing. Those who had taken responsibility in particular areas updated the team on developments since our last meeting. Joe revealed his design for the promotional poster and Ann read out the accompanying press release that she had written. A copy of both the poster and the press release would be sent to local media outlets in the week prior to the carol service. Kevin underlined the need to reach out to the margins and encourage people who might not otherwise attend. Margaret, Eileen, Kevin and Barbara took copies of the press release to circulate to community groups that they were involved in. Margaret emphasised the importance of creating the right spiritual atmosphere at the carol service to encourage those who might otherwise be cynical of “religious events” to consider attending the workshop. She believes that people are “crying out for something more spiritual” than what is being offered to them in their parish liturgies. Br. Phil spoke about his hope that as a result of these initiatives a small community of Christians would meet in Mount Sion and anticipate ways in which they could respond to the needs of the marginalised in the city as Edmund Rice did. The general consensus was that the objective that the team had set for themselves could be attained.

Middle phase of the meeting:

We then watched a ten minute excerpt from the film ‘The Mission’ and reflected on what we considered to be central to the identity of a Christian community. The participants broke into groups of two and discussed their vision for the future of the Church in Ireland. One person from each group then fed back the ideas that emerged from these discussions. What follows is a summary of the key themes that surfaced during this discussion:

- The need for a new solidarity between people. People’s lives have become progressively more individualistic and the value of community is slowly dissipating.
- The Gospel can provide a stimulus for social justice. Reflection on scripture opens the gateway to the realm of the Spirit and compels us outwards to mediate this presence in concrete ways into our communities.
- We need time to listen to others and draw our discernment from what they teach us. Creating an environment where people can speak freely on matters pertaining to their faith is needed in today’s society.
- A sense of mystery is being eroded in today’s culture yet people are searching for new spiritual avenues. Quiet meditation appeals to increasing numbers of people today.
- The laity are central to the process of renewal in the Church. The disillusionment with the current Church has resulted in a mass exodus from the institutional Church. This time of crisis could become a time of opportunity that paves the way for a new dynamic of Church in Ireland today.

Each member of the team articulated their vision of Church and Phil linked our ideas to some of the central themes in Liberation Theology.

Concluding phase of the meeting:

Following a break, the group reconvened to finalise plans for the forthcoming carol service to be held in The Edmund Rice Chapel on December 19th. The team decided on preparatory work that was required in advance of the carol service and each person then chose to oversee the planning of one area most suited to their skill sets. Each member of the Action Learning Set played an important role in the planning of the service making sure that the necessary preparatory work was done. They identified specific areas of responsibility that were divided between members of the team; some would work on the aesthetics of the chapel using candles and a simple manger to evoke a sense of the mystery of the first Christmas, others would tie together the various strands of the programme together so that the readings and carols captured each stage of the Christmas story and others would be responsible for welcoming people as they arrived and encouraging them to stay for refreshments after the event. It was agreed that the team would meet at 6pm on the day of the carol service to put the finishing touches to their preparations. Allocation of responsibilities:

- Eileen and Barbara would select the readings and readers for the carol service and put together a 45 minute programme that would blend in Gospel readings and selected reflections with the carols chosen by the choir.

- Margaret and Kevin would look after the aesthetics in the Edmund Rice Chapel in advance of the Carol Service and would lay out candles around the manger that would be positioned in the centre of the Chapel.
- Phil would liaise with the choir and select a programme of music that would complement the theme of the evening. He would speak for 1 minute at the end of the service to inform those who attended of the upcoming workshop on small Christian community.
- Barbara, Eileen and Br. Phil would collect the names and contact details of interested people after the Carols Service.
- Br. Phil would take charge of circulating a newsletter after the carol service to give people more details about the workshop.

Plans were then finalised for the workshop. The workshop would take place on Saturday 14th of January, 2012 in the Edmund Rice Centre. Three members of The Fig Tree Group had accepted the invitation to attend. Phil will host them for the weekend and arrange for them to have a guided tour of the city. It is the first time for two of their members to leave Dublin. Ann and Phil agreed to share the introductory session and facilitate the discussion on the day. The Fig Tree Group will lead the second phase of the workshop and give people an insight into what it is like to be part of a small Christian community. Towards the end of the workshop, the participants will be encouraged to define concrete steps to set in motion the process of forming a small Christian community in Waterford.

Appendix 2.3: Third Meeting of the Action Learning Set

Date: January 21st, 2011

Venue: The Edmund Rice Heritage Centre, Mount Sion, Waterford

Report compiled by Steve Hale

Present: Phil Brennan, Ann Hayes, Eileen Coffey, Barbara Burke, Margaret O'Rathaille, Joe Dalton, Kevin Mascarenhas, Phil Ryan, Steve Hale

Opening phase of this meeting:

The team had a short discussion on the response of people to the workshop. There was unanimous agreement that the workshop was a success and that the feedback from the participants was very positive. In all 20 attended the workshop and 10 people have expressed an interest in forming their own small Christian community. Gemma, Mary and Yvonne from 'The Fig Tree Group' were singled out for praise and the team agreed that their presentation encapsulated everything that is central to the life of a small Christian community. Their personal testimonies made a lasting impression on all who attended. What follows is a short summary of the understanding of small Christian community that emerged over the course of the workshop:

- A small Christian community is a place where people come together to freely share their story, dismiss any negativity from the past and go forward together into the future.
- A major component for the group is a spirit of trust that has built up over a period of time. In that atmosphere of trust, individuals are free to bring their own insights, feelings, interpretations to the group without fear of being over ruled or dismissed.

It is this atmosphere that supports the group and gives them a sense of belonging and purpose.

- The validity of the group's being together as a SCC is borne out in their outreach to the community (e.g. Sunflower group, parish involvement, re-gentrification of Fatima Mansions). There has to be a challenge, and edge to it, and while the group offers support for the individual, when it goes beyond its own circle, there is an experience of new energy – church!

The team agreed that there was a palpable sense of hope and optimism at the end of the workshop. People were willing to share their thoughts and observations and the discussions were animated and lively throughout. The participants who expressed an interest in being part of a small Christian community decided to meet as a group on the last Tuesday of the month in The Edmund Rice Centre. It was agreed by them that no reminder would be given to people in advance of the first meeting so that the onus was very much left to each individual to make their own decision. The team felt a real satisfaction that their goal had been achieved, and that, as a result of their Action Research, a new small Christian community was about to commence in the city.

Middle phase of the meeting:

The next phase of the discussion turned to reflecting on core guidelines that would help to sustain a small Christian community as it evolves. We looked at a short excerpt from the film 'Romero' and reflected on guiding principles that we believed would contribute to the growth and development of a small Christian community. The following are the strategies/interventions that emerged through these discussions. The team members believe that all 3 elements combine to capture what is intrinsic to the identity of a small Christian community:

- (1) Create an atmosphere that promotes spiritual reflection and draws members into the mystery of God's presence in the world.
- (2) Encourage people to identify a 'burning issue' that will invigorate the community with life. This emphasis on Christian praxis will compel a community outwards and draw these communities closer to the needs of the poor.
- (3) Promote a new style of shared leadership, breaking from a reliance on one person and harnessing the talents and gifts that each person brings to their community.

Phil explained that these guidelines would be offered to the new community and that his immediate task was to adapt them to the Waterford/Omagh Peace Choir.

Concluding phase of this meeting:

The team agreed to meet up for a meal the following week to celebrate a job well done! We had an informal discussion over refreshments where we chatted about what we learned from the series of meetings. The team decided to meet up every month to help in the organisation of a Taizé service in The Edmund Rice Centre and to liaise with members of the newly formed 'Edmund Rice Small Christian Community' and support them in any way possible.

Base Christian Communities

Phil Brennan

gathering



On the outskirts of the cities, in little villages, in the immense hinterland where a priest is almost never seen, the lowly people gather with their coordinator to hear and celebrate the message of liberation... The Church universal, sacrament of the Reign, is taking shape and form before our very eyes.

Leonardo Boff

transformation



Courage must lead us not to half way reforms that badly gloss over our fears and trepidations, but to a transformation of what we know today... times demand of us a creative spark that will allow us to think up and create new ecclesial structures and new ways for the Christian Community to be present in the world.

Gustavo Gutierrez

re-building the church



In the base communities, almost entirely made up of lay people, one sees the true creation of an ecclesial reality, of communal witness, of organization and missionary responsibility. The lay people take the word in their own hands, create symbols and rites, and rebuild the Church with grassroot materials.

Leonardo Boff

a new kind of organisation

Now the road is open to a new incarnation of the gospel in a still-unreached continent, the continent of the poor. And a new kind of organization can spring up in the Church, an organization that is more popular, more shared, more closely connected with the cause of justice and a life worth living.



Leonardo Boff

word of God

The word of God is not just the Bible. The word of God is within reality and it can be discovered there with the help of the Bible.



Carlos Mesters

Discovering power and worth



Basic communities and the various church organisations that are committed to liberation now provide the structures for a conscientising education. In fact, it can be said that basic communities themselves are a result of oppressed people becoming aware, due to conscientisation, and discovering their own power and worth.

Peadar Kirby

love

The gift of God's love is the source of our being and puts its impress on our lives. We have been made by love and for love. Only by loving, then, can we fulfil ourselves as persons; that is how we respond to the initiative taken by God's love.



Gustavo Gutierrez

A new hope

A new hope is indeed being born today... Individualism and technology have gone too far; the illusion of a better world based on economics and technology is evaporating... A renaissance is coming. Soon there will be a multitude of communities founded on adoration and presence to the poor, linked to each other and to the great communities of the Church, which are themselves being renewed... A new Church is indeed being born.



Jean Vanier

suffering and conflict



Nothing incriminates our one church more than the attempt to preserve its political innocence by withholding its vote in the face of the suffering and conflicts of this world.

Johannes Baptiste Metz

Written by ordinary people

An interesting phenomenon of our times is that the Bible is to be found back in the hands of the laity. It is no longer the sole preserve of the cleric or the scholar. This is a wholesome development because it was written by ordinary people for ordinary people in the first place.



James O' Halloran

Typical signs of the kingdom



When I ask, then, where do we find the Kingdom growing here on earth, we look, not for some earth shattering event, but for small projects that no-one knows about, which are trying to improve the quality of life for those who are on the margins. It is the small little efforts, in unheard-of housing estates or isolated rural communities, which are the typical signs of the Kingdom of God... We can all therefore become involved in building the Kingdom. Wherever we are living, whatever we are working at, there we can help to build the Kingdom.

Peter McVerry

Appendix 3 - Omagh Waterford Peace Choir Mission Statement



Omagh Waterford Peace Choir

Directors: Phil Brennan, Elaine Condon, Drew Hamilton, Emma Miller.

Motto: 'To Sing, To Pray, To Act'.

Mission Statement: 'To dedicate ourselves to bringing the message of peace and reconciliation to others through our music and through our compassion for those in need in our world.'

'To Sing': The coming year will be a defining one for the 'Waterford/Omagh Peace Choir'. Maybe we have run our course and it is time now to move on or maybe this group really wants to work together to create something special. Towards the end of last year, it took a considerable 'heave' to get people to turn up for workshops and events and it left those who did attend under serious pressure to create something that reflected the quality that people expected from us. So this year, those who commit have to really try their best to make events. Only you can make this commitment. If you have not got the time or if you feel your heart is not quite in it anymore, just step aside and the door will be open for you if you ever want to return in the future. It would be better to have a small group that we can all totally rely on than to have a large group and to be down 10 or more from that group every time we meet. Crucially, though, all efforts will be made to accommodate members who have very genuine reasons for not making events. This has always been the case!

We have some very exciting and interesting events to look forward to over the coming year. The Concert in Dublin to launch 'Flanders Christmas Truce Week' in Kimmage Manor is definitely going ahead on the 3rd of December. Don Mullan wants to make this concert a 'satellite concert' to be beamed to different parts of the world and used as a prototype for similar concerts around the world aimed at promoting peace and reconciliation. We hope to sing in Sean McDermott Street, Dublin among the poor in Dublin's North Inner City the next day so that this Saturday and Sunday will be the big weekend before Christmas. It would also be nice to do a concert in Omagh and possibly Gorey or Waterford coming up to Christmas. These are some of the events in the pipeline. They will be confirmed over the next month. We need to re-discover what we're about, namely promoting peace and reconciliation through our music and bringing it to people that will really appreciate it. Just note Monday, October 17th. We have been asked to sing at 11am on that Monday at The World Poverty Commemorative Stone' at an event highlighting world poverty. If 10 of us could free ourselves up to attend, it would be great!

** We will need to do two workshops between now and February, one possibly mid October in Waterford and the other mid February in Omagh. At each of these workshops, we hope to learn 4 new pieces, so that our music never becomes stale. What we need is

some fresh, new music, some religious and some contemporary, with a message that reflects what we are about as a Choir. This side of Christmas, it would be good to do two concerts, one North, one South.

** Whether the events are big or small, they all merit our full commitment and attention to the highest possible standards. It could be so easy to get casual and only 'be up for' the more high profile events.

** We have assembled a great team of musicians; Caolan McCarthy and David Hayes (Piano), Pat Fitzpatrick (Flute and Saxophone), Elaine Harvey (Flute), Garth McGurgan (Lead Guitar), Phil Brennan (Acoustic Guitar), Sarah Rodgers (Violin) Michael Kielty and Conor Moore (Percussion). This blend of instruments will form a vital backdrop to all we do.

** Be happy to be part of the choir and know that what we achieve would be impossible without hard work from us all. We are privileged to be part of it. If it's not really for you at the moment, step aside for a while. Choir weekends are special and our concerts have a huge impact. The key to sustaining this is that we are all genuine about our commitment and value what we have. It simply does not work otherwise.

** We need to prepare well and work hard to safeguard our standards. Quality performances don't just happen. Our attention to detail in 'fine tuning' our sound, tightening our harmonies and creating a special sound will demand of us a willingness to put the work in. There is always a danger that we can become complacent about the music and other aspects of Choir life take over. The socialising is central to all we do as a group, our meals, our few drinks together, the laughs and the friendships. We need to ensure that both work in tandem. We need to be deeply respectful of all events we sing at. We need to be very clear on our focus as choir members; namely to promote our message through our music and our friendships. It is nice to have a few drinks together but not in a way that takes from the integrity of our performances or alienates non-drinkers from within the choir.

'To Pray': The spiritual resonance that underpins our music is central to all we do in The Omagh Waterford Peace Choir. Through our music, we give expression to our belief that our Creator has moulded us and challenges us to be instruments of His love in our lives. When we sing, we do so as ordinary people with an extraordinary truth to convey; that no matter how weak we are, no matter how much we slip up, no matter how alienated or abandoned we may feel from time to time, we are not alone. Our God embraces the weak and the vulnerable, the downtrodden and the broken, and shares our joy when we succeed in life. We need to sing with this inner conviction. This cannot be fake. It has to be genuine because when we reach this zone, we have the power to really move people when we sing.

The more we sing at events that bring us close to those who are poor or broken or simply struggling to carry their burdens in life, the more our eyes will be opened to discovering God's presence in them. This is why singing in hospitals and nursing homes coming up to Christmas is so rewarding, why those of us privileged to go to Sri Lanka got far more from the children than we could possibly give to them, why doing a concert in Sean McDermott Street could be a real 'eye opener' for all of us. The words of our songs are every bit as important as the music. Our music can become our prayer, and, in singing from the heart, we can instil in those who hear us a sense that God is with them, listening to them, loving

them. This is our gift and we have created some very special moments in Omagh and Waterford over the past few years. It would be a shame if this was to end. The people really value what we do!

'To Act': To date we have raised in excess of £215,000 from our fundraisers and concerts for houses for poor families in Boaco, Nicaragua, for the Orphanages in Sri Lanka, and, over the last two years for medical aid in Africa. If there is sufficient interest, we hope to re-visit Sri Lanka in the summer of 2013 and do concerts and games in the 7 orphanages that we have fundraised for and helped over the past 6 years. This year, we need to create opportunities that allow us bring our message to those who value it and need it. Those who are crying out for something really seem to appreciate our message. The best gift we can give is to dedicate a little time to simply being with those who are in need of reassurance, a chat, a laugh, maybe some spiritual solace that we can provide through our music. We have the capacity to reach people and to give them strength in the face of their suffering. We may not change the world, but we can make a huge difference to the lives of a few.

What you need to do to prepare for the coming year...

Now is the time for you to reflect on why the choir is important to you and if you have the time to commit to it. Before completing the final mission statement for the coming year, each member is asked to give their own suggestions as to how the choir can best move forward. So just have a little think about the choir under the headings, 'to sing, to pray, to act' and e-mail me a short reflection on what aspects of the choir matter most to you. The Waterford Omagh Peace choir, if it is to endure, needs to be very clear on where it is going. The Mission Statement for the coming year will reflect the ideas and suggestions of all of our members. We have achieved great things, often in quiet ways, in the past. Let us remain true to what is important to the choir and see where the future brings us.

These are some of the views of members of the Choir that sum up what we are about:

“I get so much from the choir myself. I have been finding it difficult living and working away from home but just listening to the choir’s music can help me. I want to be able to do the same for other people who listen to us sing.” (Caroline)

“I really agree that we need to get back to basics. Looking back over my time in the choir, the smaller and more humble events really have been the most special... The choir is all about spreading our message of hope and we can only do this when we sing with conviction. We reach people on a personal level and the best concerts are when the audience becomes part of us.” (Stephanie)

“There are many things I love about singing in the choir starting with people’s reactions when we sing. I love the smiles, the shaking of heads in disbelief that we are producing the sound that people are hearing, the tears we witness running down people’s faces and the appreciation of people waiting to thank us after our events. It reminds me that we are part of something special.” (Sarah-Jane)

“The Choir never forces one religion on another. It respects all religious backgrounds and the differing religious convictions within the group... We need to believe the words of the songs we sing not just sing them. This is what can make us different.” (Pamela)

“I stand proud to say that I am part of something striving towards promoting peace and turning its back on violence in our communities... It is important that we that we carry the convictions that we sing on stage into our lives offstage. This makes our sound authentic and genuine.” (Leisha)



“I like the way everyone has said everything they wanted to air and it makes it much easier for decisions on upcoming events when everyone’s views are out in the open.” (Lauren)

“We’re about creating a special and intense atmosphere when we sing. That’s what we are good at and that’s what we should stick to.” (John)



“Choir for me is all about music and friendship... It’s important to re-fresh music as new songs bring with them a new energy and a new enthusiasm.” (Liz)

“To be part of the choir is something I truly value a lot and I cannot wait to get to the workshop, learn new pieces and really take the choir forward. I just hope that we all give it the commitment the choir deserves and needs if it is to continue on its journey... I can’t believe it’s a year since I joined and although it has been a rough year in many ways, I can safely say hand on heart that without choir it would have been a much worse year. It has given me something to be a part of, to look forward to, a chance to meet some incredibly nice and talented people.” (Damian)