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**A PROCESS MODEL FOR CHURCH CHANGE AS REFLECTED IN  
ST. THOMAS' ANGLICAN CHURCH, SHEFFIELD, ENGLAND**

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**abstract**

This article is an abbreviation of research originally presented to Dr. Eddie Gibbs, Donald McGavran Professor of Church Growth at Fuller Theological Seminary. Gibbs has been involved with the church under study for over two decades and lauded the author's research. The research indicates a five-stage/four-trigger process model of change that may serve as an ecclesial prototype for effective change. The article is presented here in honor of Dr. Eddie Gibbs on his retirement.

**introduction**

Though how church change occurs is discussed in Church Growth Movement literature (Whitesel 2007), a holistic process model<sup>1</sup> (Poole 2004:11) of how it takes place is largely missing. Toward envisioning such a model, the purpose of this article is to develop grounded theory (Locke 2001) from an analysis of change within a linked Anglican-Baptist congregation in Sheffield England.

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<sup>1</sup> Poole tenders a helpful definition that a "process theory is a series of events that unfold through time to bring about some outcome" (2004:11).

## **four forces of organizational change**

After examining over 2,000 journal articles on organizational change, theorists Andrew Van de Ven and Marshall Poole have noted that change occurs because one or more of four forces are pushing for change (Poole and Van de Ven 1995). The author has shown elsewhere that these four forces are replicated in ecclesial change (Whitesel 2009). The following is a short overview of these forces.

### *Life-Cycle Forces*

Life-cycle forces push for change because of the organizational life-cycle (Poole 2004:8). Life-cycle forces acknowledge a lock-step process “that is prescribed and regulated by an institutional, natural, or logical program prefigured at the beginning of the cycle” (Van de Ven and Poole 1995:7).

266 Within Church Growth Movement literature a significant amount of ink has been devoted to life-cycle forces, including: people movements (McGavran 1970:333–372), church planting for denominational survival (McGavran and Arn 1977:92–101), individual church renewal (McGavran and Hunter 1980:59–65), life-stage dynamics (Gibbs 1981:17–48, 364–366), and Schaller’s pioneers vs. homesteaders tension (Schaller 1975:93–96).

### *Teleological Forces*

Teleological theories emphasize forces pushing for change that are a result of “goal formulation, implementation, and evaluation” (Poole 2004:7). An “envisioned end state” (ibid.) or goal embraced by constituents moves the organization forward toward change.

Church Growth Movement literature is filled with examples of teleological strategies of goal-setting, including McGavran’s emphasis upon dispelling the “universal fog” that can be pierced by facts and strategic verifiability (McGavran 1970:76–78, 93–102), numerical steps for church growth (e.g. McGavran and Arn 1977:15–115), and many of the tactical conventions of Lyle Schaller, a former city-planner (Schaller 1975:97–104, 107–110, 137–141, 184–187).

### *Dialectic Forces*

Here “an opposing thesis and antithesis . . . collide to produce a synthesis” (Poole 2004:7). The process is cyclical, whereby the initial synthesis “in time becomes the thesis for the next cycle of dialectical progression” (ibid.). These forces are best dealt with through conflict resolution tools.

An analysis of the major writings of the Church Growth Movement reveals the conflict resolution segment is underrepresented (Whitesel 2007:9). Some references

are apparent, including Wagner's admonition to "plan a considerable portion of your time for trouble-shooting and problem solving" (Wagner 1976:200), and Schaller's interventionist framework (Schaller 1997:111–125, 139–149).

### *Evolutionary Forces*

Evolutionary forces are forces that push for change because some program or idea is working, and this tactic becomes the prescriptive solution for other churches. (Poole 2004:7).

Within Church Growth Movement literature, strategic programs that work in influential churches (e.g. mega-churches, etc.) can lead to a popularity for evolutionary strategies. Most notable may be Willow Creek Community Church's seeker-strategies (Hybels and Hybels 1995) and Rick Warren's purpose-driven ecclesial strategies (Warren 1995).

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## **a time line of a change event at st. thomas's church**

### **the change under scrutiny**

The change chosen for scrutiny was the rapid locational and organizational change that St. Thomas' underwent. The leaders received notice that within days that they must vacate the facility due to asbestos. As a congregation of 2,000 meeting weekly in Sheffield's largest indoor venue, simply moving to a bigger locale was not feasible. In addition, the rapidity of the move would not allow a new facility to be constructed or converted. The result was that St. Thomas' had only a matter of days to inaugurate a strategy, implement change, and then maintain ecclesial effectiveness while holding true to their theology and polity.

### **a timeline of change**

The following timeline was created from personal interviews (Whitesel 2005, 2006, 2009), as well as books written by leaders of St. Thomas' (Breen 1997, 2004; Mallon 2003; Hopkins and Breen 2007).

- 1978 Renovations at St. Thomas' forces it to share facilities with Crookes Baptist Church (Mallon 2003:20).
- 1980 Renovations at St. Thomas' are completed and St Thomas' moved back to their original facility (Mallon 2003:20).
- 1981 After missing synergies from their partnership, the two churches dialogue about merger (Mallon 2003:20).
- 1982 St. Thomas' became a joined Anglican and Baptist Church (Mallon 2003:20).

1983 Robert Warren became rector of St. Thomas' and senior leader of the Local Ecumenical Project or LEP (Warren 1989).

Fall 1985 John Wimber, leader of the network of Vineyard Churches, conducted a series of renewal meetings at the church's request (Gibbs and Bolger 2005:82). Soon after, Robert Warren invited a local charismatic community, the Nairn Street Community, to conduct a 9 p.m. postmodern worship celebration on Sunday nights. This became known as the Nine O'clock Service (NOC) which has been called the "birth of a postmodern worshipping community" in the UK (ibid.).<sup>2</sup>

October 1993 Warren resigned to work with the Anglican denomination (Mallon 2003:25). Paddy Mallon became the Baptist minister of the LEP (ibid., p. 26). Mike Breen accepted the call to St. Thomas' and sensed the Lord underscoring the word "Ephesus" in his prayer life. Breen noticed that Ephesus (*Acts 19*) had several unique and representative characteristics (Mallon 2003:26):

1. It was the principal city of the region.
2. Paul trained local leaders in a rented building.
3. Leaders went out from Ephesus to plant churches at Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Philadelphia, Sardis, Laodicea, and Colosse.
4. From Ephesus, "The word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power" (*Acts 19:20*).

Breen concluded that "the church of St. Thomas' was to function as a resource to its city and region. It was to be a base for church planting and mission and a centre for teaching and training" (Breen 1997:25).

March 1994 Breen introduced a discipleship program based upon six icons, eventually calling it Lifeshapes (Mallon 2003:18, 25). Mallon credits Lifeshapes as "the most fundamental change in this period . . . an easily transferable method of planned, disciplined and structured membership activity, at a person as well as a corporate level. . . ." (ibid.).

1994–1996 Management style under Breen moved from a consensus-modality model of Warren (Mallon 2003:27), into a more directive "manager as planner and strategist" (Jones, George, and Hill 2000:234–243). Approximately 200 people left during the first months (Mallon 2003:28).

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<sup>2</sup> An autocratic management structure eventually led the NOS into schism. For an insightful look into the forces involved, as well as the NOS's cultural influence, see Gibbs and Bolger 2005: 82–85.

1998 *The New Apostolic Churches* (Wagner 1998) has a profound effect upon St. Thomas' leadership structure, leading to an even more centralized *apostolic paradigm* (Mallon 2003:29–30; Breen 2004). Maconochie recalls, “Basically, Mike as a CEO kind of guy, helped us through it all. Although he was very delegating in terms of responsibility for clusters and things, he was the main person we processed (things) through. . . .” (Maconochie 2007:5).

However, when a major church decision was needed, more modality was practiced, with Maconochie recalling, “We'd move back toward more of a Baptist (consensus) model where we'd actually have a church meeting and everybody would vote on it” (Maconochie 2007:6).

September 1998 Leaders of St. Thomas' began to sense that the size of their facilities was “restricting growth” (Mallon 2007:1). St. Thomas' began to meet in a “leisure centre” called the Logos Centre one Sunday each month (Mallon 2007:4). Since the venue was more accessible for unchurched people than the parish church, growth among unchurched attendees increased. The temporary nature of the facility was fostered in part because the facility was only available thirty-five Sundays a year, it was expensive to rent, and much labor and time was spent in setup and teardown (Mallon 2003:36).

January 2000 The Roxy nightclub became available for rent, and appeared to overcome the sociological strangulation of the leisure center. Media attention was fostered because The Roxy had been a bawdy concert venue, and by mid-February four hundred people were added to the church (Mallon 2003:36–37). “I think what we saw was every time we created space people joined us,” recalled Mallon. “Some of that was transfer growth, but a lot of it was conversionary growth” (Mallon 2007:4).

Sunday mornings at The Roxy attracted Baby Boomers, while Sunday evenings attracted Generation X. Services also continued at the parish church in Crookes and were attended by approximately three hundred people committed to the local Crookes parish (Mallon 2003:36–37).

Almost without strategic intent, St. Thomas' had evolved into multiple sub-congregations (Hunter 1979:63; Whitesel and Hunter 2001:26–27). They designated these sub-congregations “celebrations” after a term used by C. Peter Wagner (1976:101–2). Three celebrations emerged, each with different cultural patrons: Sunday morning (Boomer) at The Roxy, Sunday evening (Gen. X) at the Roxy, and Sunday morning at the Crookes parish church (Crookes neighborhood of Sheffield).

2000–2001 The three celebrations were comprised of “clusters” of three to seven small groups. These clusters began to reduplicate themselves among (Mallon 2003:37):

1. Students,
2. The Café culture,
3. Inner-city areas,
4. Generation X singles,
5. Generation X married couples.

January 2001 Mike Breen senses God saying, “What would you do if I took away the Roxy?” (Mallon 2003:38; Breen 2007:1–2). “I was in a bit of a panic about that,” recalled Breen, “because we had just been surveyed with the rest of the churches in Great Britain. . . . as being the largest church in Great Britain at that time. So most certainly we were a mega-church. And, it felt like God was giving me the option of really going in the mega-church direction or really embracing this thing he had been developing in us the last few years” (Breen 2007:2).

Breen still saw this as God’s nudging toward planting clusters as missional communities, something that they had always intended. “We already had begun by that stage to realize that we were being confined, as we had been at the parish church, by the size of the building and that was restricting growth,” stated Mallon. “So then what we did was we began to think about planting out the clusters” (Mallon 2007:1).

A leadership structure developed, with leaders of celebrations (culturally similar groups of clusters) reporting to Breen or other senior staff. Operating underneath celebration leaders were cluster leaders who oversaw a network of small group leaders (Breen 2007:2).

However, moving from the seemingly successful and comfortable mega-church event orientation that The Roxy fostered still gave cause for hesitancy (Mallon 2003:38) and even group exit behavior (Maconochie 2007:3).

December 2001 An attendee who had concerns about the safety of the “torpedo-style heaters” used to heat The Roxy contacted the local authorities requesting a safety inspection (Mallon 2003:39; Calladine 2007:14–15). A subsequent inspection revealed that asbestos rendered The Roxy an immediate health hazard (Calladine 2007:4). “If we were going to do the work on the building that we wanted to, we would have had to put a bubble over the building and put people in space suits” remembered Calladine. “It would have cost around \$7 million to renovate . . . that

building is still standing there unoccupied. Anybody who's going to do anything to that building is going to have to spend huge amounts. We could've come up with 60 thousand, but it's 60 thousand into a money pit . . ." (Calladine 2007:4).

“. . . One minute we were in the building and basically several weeks later we were out because we had to close immediately due to the health and safety issues” remembered Woodhead (Woodhead 2007:2). Though this event occurred just before Christmas 2001, the leaders were able to negotiate a five week grace period before they were forced to leave (Mallon 2007:2).

Communicating the venue change to a large congregation flowed effectively through of the celebration-cluster-cell structure. “. . . The most effective way of communication was . . . through four phone calls” recalled Calladine (Calladine 2007:4). The rector would (1) call the celebration leaders, who would (2) call the cluster leaders, who would then call (3) the small group leaders, who would then call (4) all small group attendees.

In addition, Maconochie recounts the spiritual preparation for this change, stating, “We'd been talking about it for nearly a year and so we just said to the guys, ‘Well the Lord said it was going to happen and it has happened and there you go.’” (Maconochie 2007:2). Woodhead added, “So he'd (Breen) already shared that with the staff team, the senior staff and then the staff team and some of the cluster leaders were aware of this word. But was it going to happen? We don't know because we've got this building and then that was it . . . it was taken away so they (the leaders) were ready to go” (Woodhead 2007:2).

January 27, 2002 The last celebration was held in The Roxy (Calladine 2007:15) with seventeen clusters commissioned to begin meeting the following week to replace the Sunday gatherings at The Roxy (Mallon 2003:39). The emphasis from the weekly Roxy events, to a weekly cluster meeting, democratized the process according to Woodhead, for “people had to really begin to sort things out for themselves. They couldn't depend on the center for everything. So leadership took on much more of a dynamic, much more of a community (that) ‘we're in this together’ for each cluster. ‘We've got to go out and find the venues. And, we're looking to see what God's heart is for this particular area.’ So there was a whole different dynamic it seemed to me when guys were reporting back” (Woodhead 2007:1).

February 3, 2002 Seventeen clusters are planted throughout Sheffield as St. Thomas' takes on a "dispersed church" mode (Mallon 2007:3). The bishop gave permission for clusters to meet within the boundaries of other Anglican parishes (Mallon 2007:2-3).

2002 The Diocesan Handbook of Sheffield indicates the average Anglican parish has twenty-five worshippers (Mallon 2003:36).

2003 St. Thomas' church now has thirty-four to thirty-five clusters (Mallon 2007:4; Breen 2007:2) with (Mallon 2003:36):

1. 2,500 members,
2. 85 percent under the ages of 40,
3. 298 identify themselves as Anglicans,
4. 188 identify themselves as Baptists.

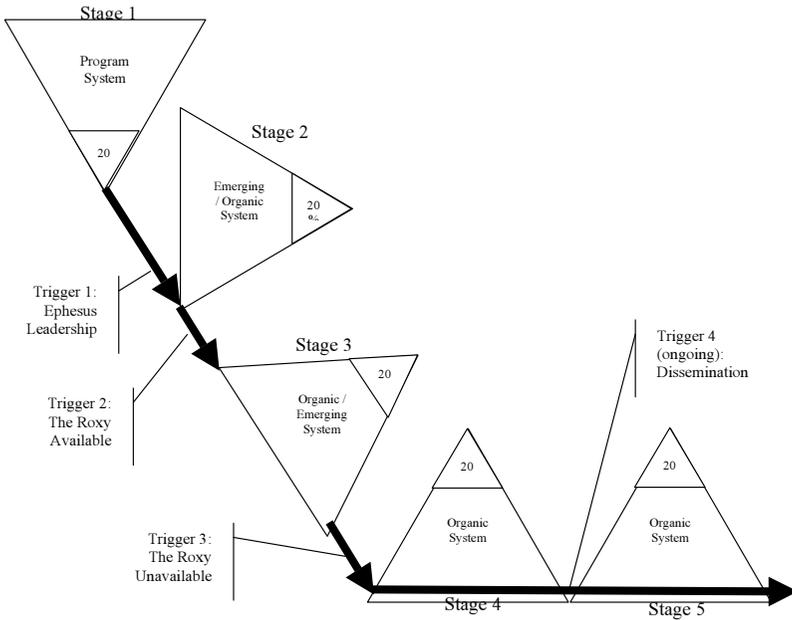
Mallon believes this one year period was "the greatest growth we saw as a church. It showed us what we weren't going to go down the mega-church road, which was an option. And when we had The Roxy, a plan was to make it a large worship complex that would have been glass and chrome and glitter. And now, we were spared all of that" (Mallon 2007:4).

Still, this considerable growth was a surprise. Mallon recalls, "Even developing the resources for the clustering for the six months beforehand, we had no idea we would double in size in terms of cluster leaders in the subsequent twelve months that we were in a dispersed mode. It's a bit like *The Acts of the Apostles*: the idea of expansion, contraction, consolidation and then you grow again" (Mallon 2007:6).

## **a process model of change at st. thomas' church**

### **a process model**

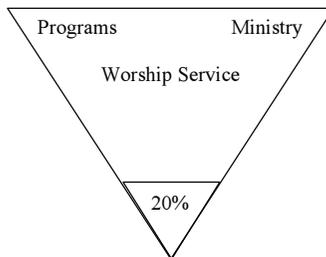
The following process model follows the congregation from a gathered congregation, into a dispersed, cluster-orientated congregation. The triangles replace the customary rectangle of process models. At St. Thomas' the triangle represents an interconnected triad of spiritual holism in its UP-IN-OUT ministry (Mallon 2003; Breen 2004, 2005). Hopkins and Breen describe this triangle as the "glue or essence" of their organizational structure (Hopkins and Breen 2007). Arrows signify "trigger events" that push the organization forward toward change (per Trigger Theories, e.g. Pondy 1967, Worchel 1998, and Dyke and Starke 1999).



**Figure 1**  
A Process Model for Ecclesial Change at St. Thomas' Church, Sheffield, England

*Stage 1, Program System*

The pastorate of Robert Warren (1983–1993) molded the church into an increasingly program system of organizational behavior (Maconochie 2007:5–6). Twenty percent of the congregants support the burgeoning programs above them, often with resultant burnout. Mallon describes this period as a consensus model of leadership, that became “stified, impaired, and over-bureaucratic” (Mallon 2003:27). Hopkins and Breen’s inverted triangle of Figure 2 suggests an unstable organizational behavior.



**Figure 2**  
Hopkins and Breen Program System (Hopkins and Breen 2007:67).

### *Trigger 1, Ephesus Leadership*

Breen's emphasis upon the word "Ephesus" (Mallon 2003:26) began to move the leadership toward a more teleological style (Breen 1997:25). The first trigger (arrow) in Figure 1 indicates the four forces pushing in the following ranked order:

1. *Dialectic forces* are the most powerful forces pushing for change, as Breen begins a steady yet measured process (Breen 2007:6) of acquainting leaders, congregants, and attendees with a new church model based upon the church at Ephesus.
2. *Life-cycle forces* next affect change, as Breen emphasizes a new era of church life is emerging (Breen 2007:2).
3. *Evolutionary forces* are exemplified in Breen's wide range of readings (Breen 2007:4), basing his leadership model upon Ken Blanchard's *The One Minute Manager* (Mallon 2003),
4. *Teleological forces* did not appear to play a significant role, as goals are downplayed in lieu of a reorientation in vision.

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Breen begins to "tip" the congregational behavior system (in a counterclockwise rotation in Figure 2) from the point-down perspective toward an upright configuration. But first it must rotate through the horizontal (point to the right) configuration of a mission movement (Hopkins and Breen 2007:70).

### *Stage 2, Emerging/Organic Leadership*

The congregation moves into a growth stage, with increasing numbers requiring stronger sodality leadership (Wagner 1984:141–165). Though small groups and clusters are integrated, increasingly the leaders are required to be primary decision makers. Maconochie remembers, "Basically Mike, as a CEO kind of guy, helped us through it all. Although he was very delegating in terms of responsibility for clusters and things, he was the main person we processed (things) through" (Maconochie 2007:5).

### *Trigger 2, The Roxy is Available*

The Roxy becomes available and expands St. Thomas' ministry. To the leaders it appears that "every time we created space people joined us," (Mallon 2007:4). At Trigger 2 the four forces occur in the following ranked order:

1. *Teleological forces* push the church to change as The Roxy must be adapted and utilized. Examples such as the noisy torpedo-heaters, safety issues, and other administrative objectives are required to effectively utilize Sheffield's largest venue.
2. *Dialectic forces* remain strong as Breen and others seek to maintain the

unity and missional faithfulness by emphasizing a structure of small groups (cells) and clusters (Mallon 2007:6).

3. *Life-cycle forces* decline, as the church sees teleological and dialectical issues coming to the forefront. Yet, life-cycle forces are still evident, as the church moves into what congregants perceive as a new stage in the church's life, one that resembles a mega-church.
4. Once much of the organizational foundation has been laid, *evolutionary forces* seem to wane as leaders have few external models to follow (Maconochie 2007:3).

### *Stage 3, Organic/Emerging System*

The growing size of the new congregation now continues to “tip” the triangle (continuing a counterclockwise rotation) from the forward sodality leadership style of Stage 2, into a more organic structure with broader participation by volunteers. This broadening of the base (e.g. more cell leaders and cluster leaders are needed) is required by the size of the growing congregation. As a result, cells and clusters receive an increasing emphasis, a factor that would prepare the church for the next trigger, the loss of The Roxy. God prepares Breen personally for the loss of The Roxy (Breen 2007:1–2).

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### *Trigger 3, The Roxy is No Longer Available*

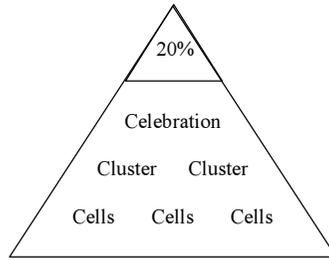
Though warned, the loss of The Roxy venue came with amazing speed. Within one month (the end of December 2001 to the end of January 2002), the church was in the dispersed mode. Forces that occurred (in ranked strength) are:

1. The rise in *teleological goal-setting* by volunteer cluster leaders democratized the process and heightened teleological change forces.
2. The sense that the church was moving into the long-awaited dispersed stage gave the sense of a prophetic *life-cycle* (Maconochie 2007:2).
3. *Evolutionary forces* now become more important as leaders sought to grapple with the implications of leading a distributed church. Administrative goals, such as how to collect the offering, etc. became increasingly important (Calladine 2007:7–8; Mallon 2007:10).
4. Because of the leadership's high-commitment/low-control style of leadership (Maconochie 2007:5), *dialectic forces* were not a major factor, as those who did not support the new vision went elsewhere.

### *Stage 4, Organic System*

St. Thomas' now emerges in much the same form it exhibits today (see Figure 3).

In Figure 3, the largest part of the church represented by the broad base,



**Figure 3**

Hopkins and Breen Program System (Hopkins and Breen 2007:67).

connects with its indigenous context. In addition, the leaders in Figure 3, represented by the twenty percent, function as strategic managers looking toward the long-range future and planning of the church.

#### *Trigger 4, (Ongoing) Dissemination*

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This ability of the twenty percent to be strategic thinkers and to focus on long-range vision has permitted St. Thomas' to send its leaders around the globe to share their experience.

1. *Evolutionary forces* come to the fore for the first time, since the strategies and systems created at St. Thomas' provide a model for similar congregations. Breen's success as a writer, as well as the designer of Lifeskills, now Lifeshapes,<sup>®</sup> is testimony to the evolutionary forces now at work. Mallon's writings have likewise helped disseminate what was learned in Sheffield. The popularity of their Visitors' Week is also an indication to the evolutionary forces at play.
2. A teleological emphasis upon measuring the church's growth indicates that *teleological goal-orientation forces* still have significant influence.
3. *Life-cycle forces* play a smaller, yet important role, as Breen, Mallon and Visitors' Week help churches on the downward side of their life-cycle (Mallon 2003:76–95, Breen 1997, 2004).
4. Finally, because dialectic forces do not usually play a significant role once a church has reputation for a particular tactic, *dialectic forces* are now less influential.

#### *Stage 5, Organic System*

St. Thomas' Church of Sheffield can be viewed today as an example of ecclesial change that is founded upon an evangelistic ethos, wed with a developing and integrated organizational management structure. Within this management structure a process model for change has emerged that deserves consideration as

much as does St. Thomas' insights on clusters (Hopkins and Breen 2007; Mallon 2003) or Lifeshapes<sup>®</sup> (Breen 1997). It is the writer's hope that this process model can provide another view of the interplay of change forces and their involvement in church change.

### questions for further research

Question 1: Does the process model described above bear resemblance to processes found in other large postmodern and organic congregations? A case study comparison between Vintage Faith Church in Santa Cruz, California, and Mars Hill in Grandville, Michigan, might inform further discussion.

Question 2: Does this process model overly emphasize the importance of dialectic powers due to this change taking place in a long-standing Anglican congregation? An investigation of newly planted postmodern and organic congregations such as The Bridge in Phoenix or Scum of the Earth in Denver might inform this research.

Question 3: What are the cultural ramifications of an English congregation as a church case study? In his responses, Breen downplayed the effect of dialectic forces because he sees English spirituality as so unpopular, that congregants who align with an evangelic church in the UK have already made a cultural break with popular expectations (Breen 2007:5). To what degree does a hostile, indifferent, or unacquainted culture bear upon change forces, especially dialectical forces?

Question 4: Does the size of a congregation make certain forces for change more prevalent and/or powerful? In other words, are teleological forces more prevalent/powerful in larger congregations where professionals are expected to operate as strategic leaders? Note how this occurred at St. Thomas' in Stage 2. A study of postmodern and organic congregations of varying size, such as the sol café in Edmonton, Alberta, along with Bluer of Minneapolis, and Solomon's Porch in Minnesota, might inform grounded theory development on this topic.

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