

ANGLIA RUSKIN UNIVERSITY
FACULTY OF ARTS, LAW AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

“SOMETHING BORROWED, SOMETHING NEW”:
WHAT MEANINGS DO GAY AND LESBIAN CHRISTIANS,
WHO ARE ANGLICANS ATTENDING THE CHURCH OF
ST. MARTIN-IN-THE-FIELDS, GIVE TO THEIR RELATIONSHIPS
OF CIVIL PARTNERSHIP?

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ABSTRACT

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PROFESSIONAL DOCTORATE

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The Civil Partnership Act (2004) was a watershed in the history of gay rights in the United Kingdom, paving the way for later legislation, including the Marriage (Same-Sex Couples) Act (2013). Lesbian and gay Christians entered civil partnerships, although there was little explicit theology to support their decision, and the Church of England opposed the Act in its official statements. This research explores an emerging theology of civil partnership, examining in particular the voices of gay and lesbian Christians who made this decision, in order primarily to bring first person accounts to bear on discussions of same-sex relationships at St. Martin-in-the-Fields, and in the wider Church.

The topic was investigated within a broad conceptual framework of hermeneutical practical theology, the language and theology of marriage, and queer theology. Using qualitative research, the research method adopted was semi-structured interviews, offered to the thirteen members of the congregation of St. Martin-in-the-Fields who were in civil partnerships when the research began. Eleven verbatim reports, with two responses to structured questionnaires, were coded by a process of thematic analysis, evidencing overarching themes.

Three major themes were identified. First, the public nature of the rite and ensuing relationship effected transformations, in which the love of God was known. I interpreted that both the civil partnership rites and corresponding relationships participate in the queer sacramental nature of reality. Second, participants reflected that God had acted in both personal and political history. I interpreted their views to reveal an emerging if under-developed queer liberation theology. Third, almost all participants likened their relationships to Christian marriage. I perceived that in effect this meant that they had “queered” the theology and language of marriage, simply by inhabiting it.

Overall, I conclude that these gay and lesbian Christian narratives create a queer theology of civil partnership, in which the understanding of the presence, activity and blessing of God—“something borrowed” from Christian history—is made new in meaning, by being lived in the actual experience of their faith and life.

Key words:

Civil Partnership; Hermeneutics; Liberation; Marriage; Queer Theology.

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Part I:
Introduction

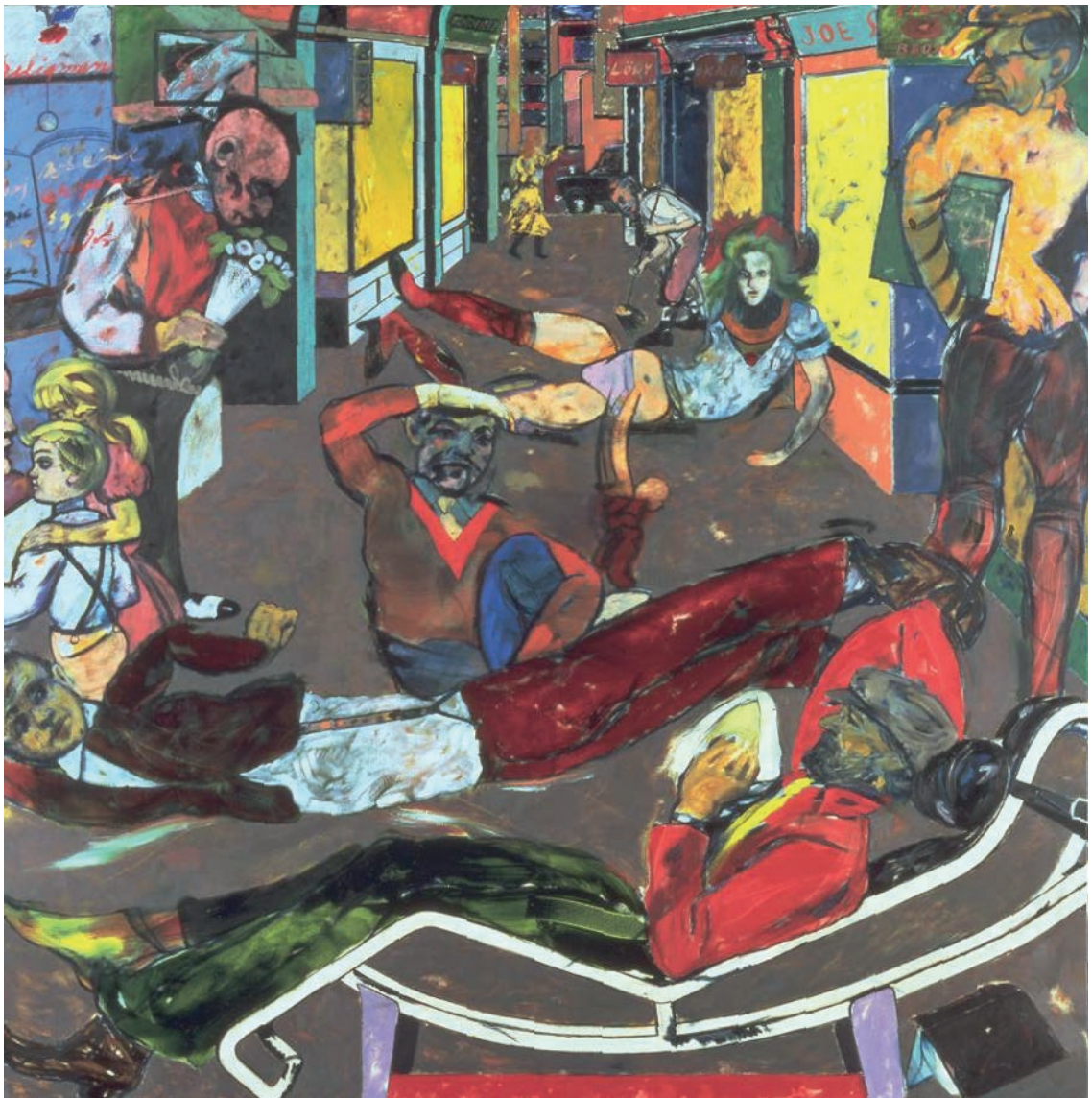
Chapter 1.

Research Question: Faith on a Landslide

To begin at the beginning

How is a research question born? My question was conceived in scenes such as this, represented by the artist R.B. Kitaj in the picture *Cecil Court, London WC2 (The Refugees)*, (Livingstone, 2010, Plate 149).

Figure 1: Kitaj, R.B., 1983–4. *Cecil Court, London WC2 (The Refugees)*. Tate.



In this painting Kitaj¹, whose work I investigate more closely in Chapter 5, declares that outsiders, though often hidden away from public view in darkened courtyards and alleyways, are part of human society. Late night drunks and revellers, prostitutes, lost children, homosexuals, all bring their colour, playfulness, sexual explicitness, and suffering to the web of life which is London's West End. Kitaj, the artist, both paints the scene and belongs in it: he is the outsider artist lying, like one asleep and dreaming, in the foreground of the picture. It is as if he is saying that these often hidden lives are meaningful to him, and that their depiction cannot be "true" unless he owns his own place among them.

I find a sense of belonging for myself, and for this research, in this picture. I have worked for most of my priestly ministry close to Cecil Court, whether as Rector of St. Anne's Soho, or as curate and then Lecturer in Inclusive Theology at St. Martin-in-the-Fields. While belonging all my life as congregation member, deaconess or priest in the Church of England I have remained "outside", first as a woman longing for ordination, and secondly as a lesbian longing for acceptance and approval. Most acutely painful for me, in this insider/outsider journey, has been the sense that where I experienced most fully the loving, restorative work of God in my life—in my relationship with my partner of 25 years—I was encouraged by the Bishops of the Church of England, both personally and in official statements about homosexuality, either to be quiet or to deny this experience of discovering blessing and of growing in holiness. I therefore sought a research question which, in my own context of ministry as a priest in the West End of London, would help me investigate theological meaning in the long term committed relationships of gay and lesbian Christians who, like myself, had entered civil partnerships.

The Research Question

My research question is therefore this: "What meanings do gay and lesbian Christians,

¹ Ronald Brooks Kitaj (1932–2007) was born in Cleveland, Ohio, the son of a Hungarian father and an American-born Russian–Jewish mother who later married Dr Walter Kitaj, a Viennese Jew. Later, as a painter, he was rejected in England for being too American and in America for spending too long in England. Perhaps seeking a culture other than his own in which to belong more deeply, he lived for considerable lengths of time in Catalonia. That area and people, whose own identity of political and cultural struggle he engaged with seriously, seemed to release in him the possibility of investigating in far greater depth his own Jewish heritage, the "Jewish Question" and Jewish Kabbalah. As if from the inside, he painted the grief of the twentieth century, the Holocaust, the Spanish Civil War, the conflicts generated by Marxism, the fate of exploited and mistreated people. Among such people were prostitutes and homosexual men.

who are Anglicans attending the Church of St. Martin-in-the-Fields, give to their relationships of civil partnership?” It is a research question through which I aimed to investigate whether it was possible to discern a theology of civil partnership, and if so what kind of insights and challenges that might yield.

In 2010, the year I began my research, there was little theology written in the UK about this landmark legislation, or about the experience of being in civil partnership. Furthermore, in the theological writing which did exist, little emphasis had been given to the voices of gay and lesbian Christians themselves. This was a time of increased tolerance and rapid resulting social change for gay and lesbian people, yet the Christian Churches of the UK were slow to make a positive theological response. Given the starkly different attitudes of Church and State towards homosexuality—one context of this research to be explored in Chapter 2 of this thesis—it was difficult for gay and lesbian Christians to discover strong footholds in faith and theology, particularly the theology of the official statements of the mainstream churches of the UK, to support their choice to enter civil partnerships, and to support them in these relationships. I wished to investigate which, if any, theological resources they had used in their discernment of their choice to enter civil partnership, and in their everyday lives. It is for this reason I call this chapter “Faith on a Landslide,” to convey the experience of grasping at theological truths, while hurtling through unknown territory.

As my research findings attest, gay and lesbian Christians did possess strong footholds in faith, and discovered both new and old theological terrains in which to stand. Most also questioned the official theology of Church, and a few decided to leave church membership, or even to leave behind the Christian faith altogether, as my findings also show.

The Research Thesis

My thesis is that by the process and findings of my research I can identify a theology of civil partnership which is queer². While my research participants use mostly traditional

² Queer theology, developed in Chapters 5 and 12, borrows language and methodology from queer theory. Queer theory is concerned to explore the ways in which heterosexuality is deemed normative in our society. It asks the question how homosexuality is constructed in many cultures as abnormal. No-one is certain how the word queer became a descriptor of a type of critical theory and theology but the development, perhaps beginning in the coalition of people of all sexualities forced into co-operation by the Aids crisis, was complete by the late 1980s when gay and bisexual activist groups coined the title “Queer Nation” and their slogan, “We’re here! We’re queer! Get used to it!” When used of God, the word queer describes both the “outsider” places and people which act as contexts for the revelation of God in Judeo-Christian religious

theology to describe the meanings of their relationships, and of their relationship rites, they experience, see, and create this theology with queer eyes, and with queer bodies acting queerly. In acts and lives of “transgressive love”, they create queer sacramental theology, queer liberation theology, and queer marriage theology. In doing this they borrow theology from the past of Christian history, yet make something utterly new.

The Research Design: A Map of the Argument

The design of my research has a fivefold shape. In Part I, I define the research question and describe the research design. In Part II (Chapters 2, 3, 4 and 5), I explore the context of the research question and the conceptual framework through which the research was understood theoretically. In Part III (Chapters 6, 7 and 8), I explain my research methodology, methods and findings. In Part IV (Chapters 9, 10, 11 and 12), I analyse these findings, describing their interpretative themes, and add a conceptual chapter about my own discovery of queer theology in these interpretations. Part V (Chapter 13) forms the conclusion of the thesis.

Research Design: Part II—Context and Conceptual Framework

The context of my research question is explored in Chapter 2. Here I describe its place in the context of the State, with particular regard to the history of equal civil rights for gay and lesbian people in the UK and the Civil Partnership Act of 2004. I outline the reactions of the Church of England to that Act, as they are portrayed in its official statements. I then explore my professional context, the Church of St. Martin-in-the-Fields where the research was based, and the place of this research question in my own life.

For a conceptual framework, I turned to a wide theoretical landscape of hermeneutical practical theology (Chapter 3), the language and theology of marriage (Chapter 4) and queer theology (Chapter 5). Hermeneutical practical theology prompted me to discover how multi-layered is the meaning of phenomena. A search for theological meaning in the lives of gay and lesbian Christians in civil partnership would involve the use of a wide range of interpretative tools. A second element was the theology of marriage. Observing feminist theologians using their dissatisfaction with hetero-patriarchal definitions of marriage to create their own new theological perspectives, I understood that I was seeking new theological perspectives on long-term

tradition, and the sense of God as ineffable, beyond definition, a challenge to all human attempts to manipulate the power and meaning of God for the benefit of self.

committed gay and lesbian relationships, and that I would be able to use “outsider-ness” as a vantage point from which to do this. A third element in the conceptual framework was queer theology. Queer theology showed me how narratives of God, known in and through queer lives and relationships, may be used to supplement, critique, and destabilise images of God and of God’s activity in heteronormative theology. This did not represent an exhaustive list of resources, nor, as I demonstrate in Chapters 5 and 11, did queer theology, or the theology of marriage, prove immediately comfortable reading for me. Nevertheless, these conceptual resources seemed to me to be the most compelling for my question.

Research Design: Part III—Methodology, Methods and Findings

In considering a methodology for this research (Chapter 6) I was drawn to Denzin and Lincoln’s description of qualitative research as “bricolage” or “montage” (2005, p.4). These descriptions fitted my growing awareness of the many-layered textures in meaning statements, of the fast moving social context of the lives I would examine, and of one aim of queer theology which is to add queer stories, queer layers, into the mix of the heteronormative narratives of Bible, Church and Church Tradition in order to view both “normal” and “abnormal” in a new light. I would add to heteronormative definitions of human sexuality the “biographies of sexual migrants, testimonies of real lives in rebellious modes of love, pleasure and suffering” (Althaus-Reid, 2003, p.8). From time to time I inserted stories from literature and the arts, like the painting by Kitaj at the start of this chapter, finding in the arts empowerment for freedom of expression in depictions of bodily lives and the exploration of ideas not often found in mainstream theology.

In terms of research methods (Chapter 7) I decided to investigate meanings by conducting qualitative research. I selected 13 participants, with 11 of whom I used semi-structured interviews, and with 2 of whom I used, at their request, questionnaires. I wrote detailed transcripts of the replies of all 13 participants, which were revised after participants’ feedback. Having considered narrative analysis, discourse analysis, and interpretative phenomenology as tools with which to analyse my data, I decided to study the work in thematic analysis of Braun and Clarke (2006, 2013), and consequently to make a thematic analysis of the verbatim reports constructed from the interviews. My choice of semi-structured interviews as a research tool I describe in Chapter 7. I chose this tool for its sensitivity in protecting confidentiality where necessary, while allowing me to interact in a meaningful, constructive and transformative way with the research

participants, as they constructed in dialogue with me narratives from the fragments of their experience.

In my research findings (Chapter 8), I identified three overarching themes in research participants' descriptions of the meaning for them of their rites and relationships of civil partnership: the transformative effects of the public affirmation of a private reality; the rites and relationships as homecoming from wilderness; and the marriage-like nature of civil partnership. An interpretation of these three themes became the content of the three interpretative chapters. A smaller yet significant theme, the effect of the research process on the researcher, became integrated into the reflections of each chapter as the journey developed.

After conducting the research, and writing my interpretative chapters, I facilitated one meeting to hear participants' reflections on my findings.

Research Design: Part IV—Meanings of civil partnership

Chapters 9 to 12 form the interpretative chapters of this research.

In Chapter 9, "Outward and Visible Sign: The Public Affirmation of a Private Reality," I discuss how entering into civil partnership allowed the research participants to have their lesbian and gay identity and their relationships openly recognised and validated. The public affirmation afforded by civil partnership they found transformative in myriad different ways, one of which was to lessen the corrosive effects of taboo in self, society and local church community. Twelve of the thirteen research participants suggested that the rites and relationships of civil partnership point to divine reality. I interpreted their words to propose that they described the rite and the relationship in sacramental terms. Since God is known here in transgressive love I suggest that God has a queer face, and invent my own title for rites and celebrations of civil partnership, as "Coming-Out Ceremonies for God."

In Chapter 10, "From Wilderness to Homecoming: Stories of Liberation," I traced narratives of liberation. Participants experienced a God working in history, in their personal lives and in the history of gay and lesbian liberation. They created in their accounts and lives a liberation theology which speaks of Christ, Creator and Spirit, which seeks spaces to belong within Church for some participants, and in rebellion against official forms of Church for others, and which involves them in the mission activities of care and justice seeking. I interpreted this God of liberation to be queer, bringing to the table of family, social and church celebrations those who were once left outside at best, at worst pilloried, abused or exiled, including among them many

research participants in this study.

In Chapter 11, “Enduring Love: Is this Marriage or Not?” I discovered that civil partnership meant marriage in a relational sense to all but two of the research participants. Research participants, except two, wished to be married, both to gain equality with heterosexual married people and to be joined to the rich theological traditions of marriage which they had known. However, I concluded, by marrying they would “queer” marriage, subverting traditionally understood gender roles in marriage, the purpose and place of sex, and the meanings of procreativity. I interpreted the God known in these relationships to be a queer God, present in the mutual desire of the partners one for another, in the challenge to understand and love the difference of the other, in the creation of new forms of family, and in the ways in which the witness of these relationships queers Church, society and all previous forms of marriage.

In Chapter 12, I expound further my conceptual understanding of these interpretative chapters and defend my thesis that this is indeed queer theology. I re-examine the queer theologies explored there: in Chapter 9, a queer sacramental theology; in Chapter 10, a queer liberation theology; in Chapter 11, a queer theology of marriage. I then suggest how different developments in queer theology may be used to develop these findings. Noticing the lack of clear definition, and multi-formed theological paths in queer theology, I identify the directions in queer theology I wish to follow. Finally, in a last section of this chapter, I show how a queer analysis of the theological concept of self-giving in sexual relationships works to throw new light on the meaning of same-sex relationships such as civil partnerships. I do this to demonstrate the usefulness, rigour and exciting expansiveness of queer theology, when it is used as a tool to enrich the Christian theology of *all* bodies in relationships of sexual intimacy and self-giving.

Research Design: Part V—Conclusions

In Chapter 13, I state the conclusions of this research, and their implications: for myself as a person and my work as a tutor in practical theology, for the church of St. Martin-in-the-Fields, and for the wider Church of England. Here, in presenting the architecture and direction of this research, I mention three conclusions.

First, while resisting in my interpretative chapters smooth definitions and confections of meaning, I assert nonetheless that layers of queer theology are found in these narratives. It is true that there is no substantial critique of essentialist views of sexuality and gender here. It is also true that there appears to be little questioning of

whether marriage as an institution is worth entering, and strangely little criticism of the “marriage industry”. However, for me it is important not to be fundamentalist about the definition of “queer theology”: here are gay and lesbian Christians questioning heteronormative patterns and language of Bible, Church, God and relationships from a particular theological point of view.

Second, the language of “queer”, however, needs to be handled with care in the circumstances in which I live and work. In liaising further with the research participants, with the church of St. Martin-in-the-Fields, and the wider Church of England, I may in fact choose not to use it. I have been struggling to understand why, but now do understand. By its forcible challenge and critique of heteronormative language of God and relationships it may engender fear of taboo and therefore decrease the possibility of useful conversation and debate. “Queer” theory and theology provide the language I choose to use, but I choose not to use it where it may stir fear and aggression in others.

Finally, liturgy helps recreate the people of God. It is the creative space for hearing the literary memory of God’s people, with the continuing story of the Word of God lived in the contemporary world. Where the Church of England planned for there to be no liturgy, in civil partnership ceremonies held in town halls, registry offices and hotels, these gay and lesbian Christians created liturgies to recreate themselves as the people of God. In church services, which, according to the official statements of the Church of England, could neither be blessings nor marriages, they recreated themselves as the people of God. The research findings show that God is neither silenced, nor displaced, nor un-named, where God chooses to be. In these research participants’ voices, there is evidence of a God who chooses to be known and addressed outside heteronormative patterns of love.

Part II:
The Contextual and Theoretical Landscape

Chapter 2.

The Context of the Research Question: Sliding between spring and rock

Introduction

In Chapter 1, I described the research question, my research thesis, and the research design which allows me to argue this thesis. In this chapter, I examine the sea-change that civil partnership legislation created in the history of gay rights in the UK, the reactions noted in the official statements and actions of the Church of England, and the attitude of the leadership team of the church where I worked, St. Martin-in-the-Fields, who decided to offer services of prayer and dedication following civil partnership. I then explore my own personal context, since this influenced all aspects of the research process from design, to interaction with research participants, to the interpretation of findings, and to the conclusions reached. Finally, I examine changes in all these contexts since this research process began, and state the aims of this research.

The National Context: The State

When the Civil Partnership Act 2004 was passed in the UK, civil partnerships were granted rights and responsibilities identical to those of civil marriage. Civil partners therefore became entitled to the same rights as married couples with regard to property ownership and tenancy, inheritance tax, social security and pension benefits, parental responsibility for a partner's children, maintenance of partner and children, life insurance recognition, and next of kin rights. The dissolution of partnerships was also given formal legal process.

It seemed as if a massive turning point had arrived in the history of gay rights with civil partnership legislation and its public celebration. The media exploded with stories and photographs of beaming same-sex couples, their families and friends, enjoying the first legally sanctioned and publicly approved rites of passage for gay and lesbian people.

The progress towards the Bill had been slow, passing these milestones:

In 2001 Ken Livingstone, the Mayor of London, created a register for same-sex couples. The register provided no rights in law for same-sex couples but established a method of publicising and celebrating such relationships.

In 2002 new adoption legislation gave unmarried and same-sex couples the right

to adopt, while the Civil Partnerships Bill 2002 was introduced as a private members' bill in House of Lords, and passed its second reading.

In 2003 *Civil Partnership: A framework for the legal recognition of same-sex couples* was published as a consultation document by the Department of Trade and Industry. In this document, government proposals for the registration of civil partnership were set out for the first time.

In 2004 responses to that consultation paper revealed that 84% welcomed the idea of a civil partnership registration scheme. In November 2004, Royal Assent was given to the Civil Partnership Act 2004.

In December 2005, the first civil partnership registrations took place.

Astonishingly, this was a mere 38 years since private homosexual acts between men over the age of 21 were decriminalised in England and Wales, and just five years since the ban on openly gay members of the Armed Forces was lifted. Ten years later, in 2015—by which time almost 140,000 people had entered into civil partnership in the UK—Ben Summerskill, the former chief executive of Stonewall³ suggested to the BBC that it had “paved the way as a test run for many of the gay rights granted in the following decade, including those around fertility treatments and adoption, as well as the 2013 Marriage (Same-Sex Couples) Bill for England, Wales and Scotland.” (BBC, 2015)

The National Context: The Church of England

The House of Bishops of the Church of England reacted to this the Civil Partnership Act with a majority voting for its rejection in the House of Lords, and consequently, when it was passed, with pastoral caution. This careful reaction, impeding neither lay nor clergy members of the Church of England from entering civil partnerships, was predicated upon the understanding that such partnerships between Christians should be celibate in nature if involving clergy, and was not even between lay people to be considered the ideal setting for sexual intercourse, since this, “as an expression of faithful intimacy, properly belongs within marriage exclusively” (Church of England, 2005).

Nevertheless, with the advent of the Civil Partnership Act, handfals of informally created services of prayer, dedication, thanksgiving, and in some cases, full services of

³ Stonewall is a UK-based lesbian, gay and bisexual equality organisation, the largest such equality body in Europe. It was formed in 1989, in protest against Clause 28 of the Local Government Act. Ben Summerskill was the Chief Executive of Stonewall from 2003 to 2014. His interview with the BBC on the tenth anniversary of the Civil Partnership Act is found at <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-35136125>.

blessing that resembled marriage liturgies, between same-sex couples were welcomed for use in some churches. I attach, as Appendix A, the PCC agreement in my own parish church to such services, made in response to the lines in the 2005 Bishops' Statement that requests for prayer should be approached with pastoral sensitivity to suit the needs of individual couples.

This cautious quiet was blown away by the Coalition Government's publication on 15th March 2012 of an Equalities Office Consultation on lifting the ban against same-sex Civil Marriage (Government Equalities Office, 2012). This precipitated an atmosphere of crisis in the Church of England, which culminated in the very long and forthright Church of England Statement in response to the Consultation, made on 12th June 2012, which contains these words:

The Church of England cannot support the proposal to enable 'all couples, regardless of their gender, to have a civil marriage ceremony'. Such a move would alter the intrinsic nature of marriage as the union of a man and a woman, as enshrined in human institutions throughout history. (Church of England, 2012).

In the national context of both Church and State, gay and lesbian Christians found themselves at the epicentre of a noisy clamour of conflicting voices. Poignantly for them, the Home Office had by its consultation process invited them to speak, albeit confidentially and on paper, while the Church of England, by its Statement, appeared to have dismissed their needs and thoughts about their own relationships.

The local context

My role as priest and Lecturer in Inclusive Theology at St. Martin-in-the-Fields provided both context and stimulus for my study. The congregation is "broad church" in theological outlook, and attracts members from all three branches of the Church of England: liberal, evangelical and catholic. It does so, both because it is a popular place of welcome to visitors from across the world, and because it takes a radical stance on issues of social justice and emphasises the importance of asking theological questions about statements of faith. Both visitors to London and Londoners moving out of their parish church to seek this radical questioning stance are attracted to belong. The welcome to the LGBT community was expressly mentioned in its Mission Statement. As a result, that community was strongly represented in the membership (Appendix B). We conducted services of prayer and thanksgiving for same-sex couples who are known to the Church, in accordance with the guidelines outlined in the document in Appendix A. In a letter to *The Times* newspaper of 2nd February 2012, over one hundred parish

clergy from the Diocese asked their clergy representatives in General Synod to voice the view that they are willing to hold Civil Partnership Registrations in the churches where they work. No less than five clergy on the staff of St. Martin's signed this letter (Appendix C).

The Personal Context

In my own life, the event which at once "outed" me as lesbian, whilst affirming among family and friends the choices I had made about a long-term committed relationship, was my own entry into civil partnership in 2006. I had had time to reflect on the value of this relationship, its liberating and grounding effect on my faith, my partner's support of my vocation, and our joint responsibilities to care not only for each other but for a multitude of family and friends, since we had been living together for 15 years. I felt sure that I knew the presence of God in both my priestly vocation and my relationship of civil partnership, and that one indeed supported the capacity to fulfil the other. Yet I knew too the struggle to both live with and challenge official church views, since I had agreed with diocesan officials not to publish news of our celebration of civil partnership in the parish of which I was incumbent.

As I reflected over how theology influenced my decision to enter and continue this partnership, and how it influenced the development of my own theology, I understood how deeply this research question would resonate with my own experience, and allow me to discover more fully my own theological voice.

Changes and Challenges in the Context of the Research Process

If asked to make a presentation about my early research process and findings, I frequently give it the title "Faith on a Landslide". When asked to explain these words, I suggested that it was difficult for gay and lesbian Christians to find spacious, commonly owned theological footholds, in which to contain and explore the meaning of their identity, faith and relationships, at a time of such rapid change. As I developed this research project, however, circumstances continued to change surprisingly fast for the congregation of St. Martin-in-the-Fields, for the Church of England, and for myself as researcher.

St. Martin-in-the-Fields welcomed a new Vicar in 2012, the Rev Canon Dr Sam Wells. Sam arrived with the reputation of being not only an extremely popular theologian, writing at the interface of critical academic reflection and church theology, with almost twenty books already published, but also a priest who as Dean of Duke University Chapel in North Carolina, USA, had been openly supportive of the lesbian

and gay community. He remained welcoming to the LGBT community at St. Martin-in-the-Fields, giving in the first year of our work together a public lecture entitled “Wholly Holy: What does the identity of being LGBT add to the Identity of Being Christian?”⁴. The words *inclusion* and *inclusive*, which have become signs sought by lesbian and gay Christians seeking welcoming congregations, remained firmly embedded in the words used by St. Martin-in-the-Fields to describe itself as a Church, and a new policy regarding prayers of thanksgiving and dedication following a same-sex civil marriage was written (Appendix D).

The exploration of same-sex marriage forms a major element in this research. It forms part of the theoretical landscape of the research (Chapter 4) and of the interpretation of findings (Chapter 11). Here, it is important to notice simply that in the year planned for interviews with a group of research participants about their experience of civil partnership, 2013–2014, the Marriage (Same-Sex Couples) Act entered the statute books of England and Wales. Since the Church of England continued to understand marriage only to be possible between a man and a woman, the Act provided a “quadruple lock”⁵ intended to safeguard clergy in the Church of England and the Church in Wales from being required to conduct a same-sex marriage without a further formal change in the law. Civil marriage nevertheless hung in the air as a near or future possibility for the research participants. Its availability became part of the context of this research, as did prayers of thanksgiving and dedication following a civil marriage, as the St. Martin’s PCC updated policy guideline indicates (Appendix D).

I remained working at St. Martin-in-the-Fields throughout the period of direct research involvement with members of the congregation. Then, in 2014, I took up a permanent post as Tutor in Contextual Theology and Mission at St. Augustine’s College

⁴ This lecture was given to the London and Southwark Changing Attitude Group at St. Martin-in-the-Fields on January 30th 2013, and is found on the website of St. Martin-in-the-Fields at <http://www.stmartin-in-the-fields.org/wp-content/uploads/Wholly-Holy-Jan-30-2013.pdf>. It has become a chapter, “LGBT Identity”, in Wells. S., 2016, *How Then Shall We Live?* Norwich: Canterbury Press.

⁵ The “quadruple lock” in the Equal (Same-Sex Couples) Marriage Bill was a list of four provisions safe-guarding religious institutions. It legislated for (1) No religious organisation or individual minister being compelled to marry same-sex couples or to permit this to happen on their premises; (2) Making it unlawful for religious organisations or their ministers to marry same-sex couples unless their organisation's governing body has expressly opted in to provisions for doing so; (3) Amending the 2010 Equality Act to ensure no discrimination claim can be brought against religious organisations or individual ministers for refusing to marry a same-sex couple; and (4) The legislation explicitly stating that it will be illegal for the Church of England and the Church in Wales to marry same-sex couples.

of Theology⁶. One of my aims in taking up the D.Prof. in Practical Theology had been to improve my theological and research skills to enable me to take up such a post, which includes teaching Master's Degree students. While sorry not to complete the research process at St. Martin's, particularly the implementation of outcomes, as a paid member of the clergy team, I knew that both the purpose and process of the research was accepted and embedded in the life of the institution, so that the completed research would be welcomed and discussed as one aspect of the ongoing work of St. Martin's in inclusion. I knew, too, that the tension in the Church of England surrounding homosexuality is a major challenge for theological colleges and courses providing formation in ministry for Readers and Ordinands, and that I therefore had a contribution to make to help address this challenge. The Centre for the Study of Christianity and Sexuality⁷ had provided me with peer support for my early research papers, so that I had already worked with these colleagues forming study days for tutors in pastoral theology wishing to discuss issues of human sexuality. Continuing to work with this group in the context of theological education in the Church of England meant that my change in employment would offer me further opportunities for the dissemination of my research. However, I remained in close contact with the Vicar and congregation of St. Martin's.

This research context, which will be explored further in Chapters 6 and 7 for the choices and decision-making in research methodology and methods which it prompted, sharpened considerably the focus of the research question and provided the field from which a research sample would be drawn.

The relevance of the research question

It is important to pause here, in the preliminary chapters of this thesis, given these rapid changes in context, particularly the commencement in 2014 of the first same-sex marriages, to ask this question: how relevant is research into the meaning of civil partnership in the field of practical theology? I assert that this remains a relevant area of research for practical theology, for three reasons. Firstly, it is research into a narrow period of history. Between the years 2004 and 2013 civil partnership was the only status recognised in the civil law of England and Wales available to gay and lesbian couples wishing to make a permanent commitment to each other. Secondly, it was new as a rite,

⁶ St. Augustine's College of Theology—formerly SEITE, the South East Institute for Theological Education—teaches theology both to independent students and to Ordinands and Readers in training for ministry in the Church of England. It serves the four Anglican dioceses of Southwark, Chichester, Canterbury and Rochester.

⁷ For a description of the work of CSCS see footnote 12 in Chapter 13.

untried in secular society, attended by no authorised liturgy of the Church of England, so that its meaning in the minds of research participants was there to be created by them. Thirdly, because it had not yet met with warm approval in the official statements of the Church of England, I would be able to explore theological meanings which give motivation to a minority creating its own theology alongside or outside the authority of Church. Since religious taboo is created and maintained by the status quo of heteronormative theology, it is likely to be diminished only by new theologies which interrupt and challenge the power of that status quo to conceal and silence that new theology. Identifying that new theology, as it is being made, is a transformative aim of this research.

Conclusion: The research journey, and the aims of this research.

My journey towards a research question lasted two years, as I prepared and presented the D.Prof. Stage 1 papers 1, 2 and 3. In these years, during which I studied the power of religious taboo around homosexuality, I moved away from what was, for me, an immersion in the pain of being silenced as a lesbian priest within the Church of England, to a sense of enjoyment in using my voice as an “out” lesbian priest and researcher. I identified as an area of research—which would help me explore theological meanings in lesbian and gay speech, rather than in silence—the theological meanings of civil partnership. I decided to investigate these meanings, in ways which will be explained in Chapters 6 and 7 of this thesis, in the context of my work as Lecturer in Inclusive Theology at St. Martin-in-the-Fields. I end Chapter 2 with a research question sufficiently wide, yet sufficiently focused, to enable me to deepen my understanding of those theologies which support transformative change in the lives of lesbian and gay Christians.

The aims of the research were threefold. First, I aimed to discern whether it was possible to identify elements or fragments of an emerging theology of civil partnership within the narratives of gay and lesbian Christians. Second, I planned to raise the voice of gay and lesbian Christians, not often heard yet much discussed, in the Statements of the Church of England. Third, I hoped to assist the congregation of St. Martin-in-the-Fields to explore theological meanings of Civil Partnership. Similarly, and to contribute to the wider secular and Church debates about “gay marriage” and civil partnerships by writing and speaking about my research, in the contexts of church synods and debates, and in the field of pastoral theological formation. Having identified a research question in Chapter 1 and examined the context of the question in Chapter 2, in Chapters 3, 4,

and 5 I explore the theoretical landscape of the research.

Chapter 3.

Hermeneutical Practical Theology

“Practical Theology is an interpretative discipline which offers new and challenging insights into Christian tradition in the light of fresh questions which emerge from particular situations.”
(Swinton and Mowat, 2006, p.26)

In my work as a parish priest in London’s West End I noticed that gay and lesbian people rarely sought my pastoral care in terms of seeking therapeutic counselling. Certainly, I was never asked to heal them of their sexual identity or orientation. Rather, their life situations threw up for them urgent questions of meaning, which they wished to discuss in the context of Christian belief. When asking me to bless their relationship, the underlying question was, usually, “Does God’s grace extend to us and our concerns?” When asking me to take care of their family after their death, and at their funeral, the underlying question was, typically, “Is the family of the Church sufficiently spacious to accommodate my family, who are warring over the meaning of my life?” When asking if they should seek ordination, the underlying question was, always, “Do you think my own interpretation of my life’s meaning will coincide with the meaning the Church of England may give to my life story?” They came seeking to discuss whether the stories of their lives coincided or clashed with the stories of God and the Church, as I understood those stories. Where was the fit between their meanings of their experiences, as they understood them, and the meaning of God’s Word, God’s kingdom, God’s Church?

They sought my opinion as a priest for a number of reasons. They came because I had an institutional role to play in their lives, or because I had, on a previous occasion, shown them interest or compassion, or because they knew that I was lesbian. They perceived me, in other words, to be a person who had already considered how the meaning of my life-story coincided with the Christian story of God.

The research question, as it is presented in chapter 2, is similar to the pastoral questions I encountered in my ministry. It is a question about meaning. It is a question related to the lived experience of lesbian and gay Christians in the context of their faith and relationships, which in turn are shaped by, and shape, church and society. It is a question about subjectivity, about how we are shaped and conditioned by the outer world, and about how we then shape that world. Moreover, again there is a clear link with my own life-story. Not only did I carefully choose the research question, but in the research process which followed, participants perceived me as “one who knows” about

being gay, about being in a civil partnership, about theology, about the official statements and theology of Church of England. I was not detached from the question to be explored, but engaged in it with from the perspective of my own life. May describes such engaged and committed researchers thus: “We are no longer proclaiming our ‘disengagement’ from our subject matter as a condition of science (positivism), but our ‘commitment’ and ‘engagement’ as a condition of understanding social life.” (May, 2001, p.15). He describes how hermeneutics refers not only to the theory and practice of interpretation but also to the ways in which, by use of hermeneutical principles, our own understanding and interpretation of our own social world are “necessary conditions for us to undertake research” (p.15). This description was congruent with one of the aims of this research, which was to challenge and deepen my own understanding of the theological meanings of civil partnership. A fitting conceptual lens through which to view the research methodologically and philosophically was, I therefore decided, hermeneutics, and a suitable integrating theoretical landscape that of practical theology understood as hermeneutic.

The Development of Practical Theology

Heitink provides a helpful brief history of the development of Practical Theology. In the teachings of Jesus, human beings become “the subject in progress of the history of salvation” (1999, p.92). In his Parable of the Talents, for example, servants are expected to work with the wealth invested in them, and their work is related to the coming of God among them (Matthew 25:14–30). In the first centuries of the early Church such subjects order the life, mission and care of the Church. Christians living in oppressive circumstances themselves are nevertheless expected to “not forget to entertain strangers” and “remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners” (Hebrews 13:1–3). After centuries of diverse forms of care, Constantine’s realignment of the Church with the power of the Roman Empire ushers in a period of more rigid ecclesiastical ordering of care. A male priest, with his own church building, surrounding territory, and distance between himself and lay people, administers the sacraments with confession used as the main tool of care and control. A positive influence of the Reformation was to restore an emphasis on lay leadership in the understanding and proclamation of the Word, and on pastoral care in a fuller sense of education, discipline and outreach to the suffering in their everyday contexts. A more negative outcome was the narrowing of faith to mean correct doctrine as reform went into years of fierce dispute with Rome over power and influence over human souls.

According to Heitink's reading the academic discipline of Practical Theology emerged from the nineteenth century onwards in the threefold context of the enlightenment of the subject, the modernisation of society, and the development of the social sciences. With the Enlightenment, there came a change in human consciousness which necessitated the development of a "theology of the subject" (Heitink, 1999, p.34).

The subject was the human being who, searching for truth, questioning, doubting, and hoping, conscious of the problems of a new era, tried to stand on his or her own spiritual feet (p.29).

With the process of differentiation, understood to be core to the meaning of modernisation, it became imperative to study church, faith and society as they were experienced in themselves as differentiated objects rather than as ideals expressed in theological terms only. Descriptive and explanatory tools for this process of process of differentiation were discovered in the social sciences.

The use of the social sciences to give not merely critique but also both form and content to Practical Theology was causing dismay when my first serious engagement began with the subject as a Masters student studying under Alastair Campbell at New College in Edinburgh in 1978. In Campbell's work *Rediscovering Pastoral Care* (1981) he quotes Thomas Oden:

Recent pastoral counselling has incurred a fixated dependency and indebtedness to modern psychology and to modern consciousness generally that has prevented it from even looking at pre-modern wisdoms of most kinds including classical pastoral care... (Oden, 1979, cited in Campbell, 1981, p.2)

Campbell encourages the reader to "ransack his own unexplored 'lumber room' of inherited images of faith in order to rediscover the richness and diversity of Christ-like care" (Campbell, 1981, p.99), urging that "we need to find a new way of speaking of the transcendent element in pastoral care" (p.11). One such way of speaking is to focus attention on understanding the meaning of pastoral actions, to view them as texts revealing meaning. I am intrigued by this alternative way of understanding pastoral actions. It gives access to understanding the nature of pastoral conversations with gay and lesbian Christians who do not seek pastoral care in terms of therapy, catharsis, or parental nurture, but in terms of understanding their position theologically. It may also throw light on the desire to create meaningful liturgical celebrations around civil partnership ceremonies. Nevertheless, in order to understand hermeneutical Practical Theology, it is necessary to pause to unpack the meaning of "hermeneutics" in this

sense.

The meaning of hermeneutics

In *Hermeneutical Theory* Sally A. Brown traces the development of contemporary hermeneutics through the work of the philosophers Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, Gadamer and Ricoeur (Brown, 2012, pp.113–115). Each of these has contributed to the implicit theoretical landscape of this research.

In the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century hermeneutics was understood to mean the interpretation of ancient texts. Schleiermacher developed the meaning of such interpretation to include not only the grammatical but also the psychological meaning of texts (Brown, p.113), while during the same period Dilthey began to pay careful regard to the historical context of both text and reader in the creation of interpretation (p.113).

Martin Heidegger expanded the meaning of hermeneutics away from a set of text-interpretative methods to include the very nature of what it is to be human in the world. He argued that experience cannot be bracketed off from being, since to be at all is to be engaged in the world of coming to understand experience (p.114). Gadamer developed the theory that understanding is the very means by which human beings come to terms with the world and, in doing so, challenged the supposed supremacy of the “scientific method” in establishing the nature of truth. He developed concepts of huge significance for Practical Theology. He introduced the concept of “horizon” to indicate both the historical context of a text, and that of the text’s reader (p.114). To understand a new horizon we need to make ourselves open both to it, and to our own pre-understandings and prejudices towards it. For Gadamer, who endeavoured to describe human experience rather than to create hermeneutical method, understanding may occur as a fusion of horizons, the reader’s horizon becoming fused with the horizon of the text so that a new meaning is formed. Understanding became therefore “an event that depends on a conversation-like, dialectical openness towards that which we hope to understand.” (Brown, 2012, p.114).

Ricoeur, like Gadamer, believed that human experience is essentially hermeneutical. However, concerned with both textual and philosophical hermeneutics, he developed hermeneutical method, proposing a hermeneutical “arc”. The reader moves from an initial hunch about meaning, which Ricoeur termed “first naïveté”, through testing and arriving at explanations, to “second naïveté”, from which the arc moves on in another similar movement. By this movement the reader arrives at a fuller

understanding of the world projected by the text and of his/her own newly provoked self-understanding (Brown, 2012, p.116). Three additional concepts influenced Practical Theology's development. First, Ricoeur developed narrative hermeneutics, of importance to practical theologians investigating the impact of narratives on pastoral care and formation. Second, he encouraged a "hermeneutic of suspicion" with regard to the need to assess critically the meanings that texts project. Third, and most influentially, he urged that other phenomena as well as texts, such as actions, become open to hermeneutical inquiry.

Two further philosophers add usefully to our understanding of hermeneutics as both epistemological and methodical tool for this research. Lyotard, in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1984), emphasised the importance of investigating small local stories and locations in the search for truth rather than resorting to former "grands recits" or "overarching meta-narratives" with claims to universal truth. His work, together with that of Michel Foucault in Discourse Analysis, led to a new understanding of texts as "polyvalent", having different functions. Foucault considered knowledge and power to be constructed within a set of social practices, so that we may need to question the extent to which the idea of truth is separable from the wielding of power. When we make interpretations, it is vital to seek the effects of history and of social and political interests in the formation of that which we research, and of our own thoughts and ideas (Brown, 2012, p.116)

For this research, which investigates meaning in human discourse, the work of these philosophers offers important theoretical perspectives. Historical context, concrete situation, and the interpretive nature of all human experience, are relevant to the task. Nevertheless, in this work we intend to research voices which may have passed unheard, and lives which may have been misunderstood. We investigate conversations which have in some way "gone wrong". Here the critique of the work of these philosophers will also be vital to consider. But first we must look at the influence of hermeneutics on the development of Practical Theology.

The development of Hermeneutical Practical Theology

After an initial and prolonged emphasis on the interpretation of biblical texts the twentieth century witnessed a burgeoning interest in the hermeneutical ontology of Heidegger and Gadamer, in the philosophical and methodological work of Paul Ricoeur, and in the light shed on hermeneutics by postmodernism. All three layers of interest are relevant to this research.

Charles Gerkin (1984) and Donald Capps (1984) wrote when a main concern of Practical Theology was to free itself from a feared submergence in the therapeutic traditions of psychology and psychoanalytic psychotherapy. How were the Bible and the classical texts of the Christian faith to be reclaimed for use in pastoral care? In his work *The Living Human Document: Re-Visioning Pastoral Counseling in a Hermeneutical Mode* (1984), Gerkin addressed two essential questions. Firstly, how is the gap between theological language and psychological language bridged in pastoral care? Secondly, when it is so bridged, what is it which effects change in the life of the troubled counsellee? Gerkin proposed that the gap is bridged “by viewing both languages from a hermeneutical perspective” (1984, p.21). This hermeneutical perspective owes much to the work of Gadamer, as did the answer to the question how change occurs: “I attempt to relate this to the problem that emerged in our consideration of change in Hans-Georg Gadamer’s concept of the fusion of horizons of understanding.” (p.49)

There is a threefold movement to follow in Gerkin’s interpretation of the importance of Gadamer’s work for the development of Practical Theology. Gerkin begins by proposing that we understand the life of the self “as fundamentally a process of interpretation” (p.20). The self develops as a hermeneut and myth-maker, as the infant adds to its own earliest pre-linguistic experiences images and languages of culture transmitted by parents and other significant people. Received stories add meaning to experiences of the self, interwoven with experiences of the other. “Interpretive mythic stories act as vessels within which both symbolic meanings and affect, both positive and negative, are held together.” (p.20).

At certain stages in self-development the way forward in self-understanding may be blocked. If pastoral care is sought at that point, rather than psychoanalysis or medicine, the language horizons of Christian theology are required alongside those of the “caring sciences”. “It is in the play and interplay that takes place between these two language horizons of understanding that change in accordance with the Christian myth can take place.” (p.47).

Gerkin, following Gadamer, rejects the idea that change takes place as a result of the imposition of the pastor’s faith. Rather:

What is sought is a fusion of horizons of understanding such that the counsellor is able to enter the meaning world of the troubled person—the other’s horizon of understanding of his or her life story—that the understanding of both may be enlarged and illuminated. (Gerkin, 1984, p.123)

Of significance to this research is Gerkin's search for pre-understandings in both counsellor and counsellee and his description of their encounter as "a continuous process of question and correction, refinement and integration" (p.61). This emphasis on the use of the self, while questioning the presuppositions of the self and of the other, helped shape my research method.

This hermeneutic approach was widely used by other pastoral theologians, including Donald Capps. Capps was concerned with methods of text analysis as much as with ontology. Asking how texts and actions may be analysed to unearth layers of meaning, Capps relied heavily on the work of the hermeneutical philosopher Paul Ricoeur (Capps, 1984). He shared with Ricoeur the suspicion that hermeneutics stood on unstable foundations if it depended too heavily on an interpretation of the author's intentions in writing or speaking (p.16). Texts should be permitted to stand alone and be analysed instead for their multiple meanings. Ricoeur suggested that hermeneutics be used to engage in structural analysis of the language systems of texts and pointed Capps in the direction of asking of language not only "what?" but also "how?" The study of Ricoeur helped Capps and other practical theologians identify how more objective procedures may be used to allow a text (or pastoral action) to speak for itself (p.30).

At this stage, it is useful to notice how both Gerkin and Capps assume that the language horizons of Biblical texts and the language horizons of psychoanalytic psychotherapy are useful catalysts in the process of human healing. The underlying assumptions of this assertion were soon to be challenged in ways useful to this research. "The rationale for relating certain biblical genres to certain forms of pastoral action is that they envision similar world disclosures which, in this case, means similar understandings of how God is revealed in human situations." (Capps, 1984, p.24).

Questions raised by theories of communicative action and feminism

The hermeneutic approach developed by Gerkin and Capps rests upon the assumption that biblical scholarship and psychological insight may be brought into critical dialogue with each other, so that new, life-enhancing horizons of understanding are opened to both counsellee and counsellor. Two broad lines of inquiry undermined this theoretical assumption in ways relevant to this research. The theory of communicative action, together with feminist and womanist theories, demanded that hermeneutical Practical Theology be given a far wider breadth of understanding.

Following the atrocities committed against minorities during World War Two the philosopher Jürgen Habermas, guided by the critical theory of the Frankfurt School,

criticised the benign view of tradition and authority in the ontological hermeneutics of Gadamer. Wondering how to regulate speech to enable the safe exploration and expression of identity essential to the reformation of democratic systems, Habermas turned his attention to the analysis of the power of speech and the purposes of language. For Habermas, the main function of language is not so much ontological, to denote the way the world is, as rather concerned primarily with method, to reach understanding and bring about consensus among people. He takes it as a given that “reaching understanding inhabits speech as its *telos*” (Habermas, 1999, p.287). Speech has a primarily pragmatic function: “One simply would not know what it is to understand the meaning of a linguistic expression if one did not know how one could make use of it in order to reach understanding with someone about something.” (p.228). As people become accustomed, Habermas reasoned, to having their actions guided by speech, and this same speech ordered by strict adherence to rules of “communicative action,” so stable patterns of social order would begin to form, and threats of aggression and fears of upheaval subside (1990, p.89). Habermas, in the light of this theory of communicative action, proposed that hermeneutics must be refashioned to recognise the functions of human interest and power in all discourse.

Feminist and womanist critics expressed similar concerns that prejudices, even when recognised, may inhibit rather than enable understanding between persons, or between text and reader:

Feminist and womanist thought has exposed the misogyny embedded in traditions and institutions that have characterised women as emotionally juvenile, morally and intellectually inferior, and spiritually evil. It has interrogated the very categories and customs that define religion. (Miller-McLemore, 1999, p.78)

Feminists have suggested that the outcome of interpretive debate may be decided by the power of stakeholders invested in that outcome:

Women are frequently required not only to justify their stories in a male-dominated institution, but also to express them in the language and thought forms of male-dominated philosophical, psychological and religious traditions. (Bennett, 2002, p.40)

Womanists highlighted the damage caused by certain interpretations of the Bible and of psychoanalytic texts to black women and other marginalised groups. All too often black women’s bodies are the sites of “critical contestable issues at the center of Black life—issues inscribed on the bodies of Black people.” (Cannon, 1995, p.70).

Womanist Teresa Snorton points out how prejudice, far from being bracketed off

or jettisoned from interpretation, deserves close study:

Pastoral care as a discipline cannot claim exemption from the cultural impact of racism, sexism and classism, for if these attitudes are not explicitly embraced in theory and practice, they certainly are implicitly inherited and must be examined within our praxis of pastoral care (1996, p.54)

The many influences upon text, self-understanding and context leads Sally A. Brown to suggest that, “Effective pastoral care will take into account the way that the interplay of many vectors of action, history, cultural traditions, and differentiated power impact the self-understanding of any individual or group” (Brown, 2012, p.119). Miller-McLemore proposed that such a multiplicity of fresh insights demands a move away from the clear-cut “living human document” image to a new image to be placed at the heart of hermeneutical Practical Theology, “the living human web” (1993, p.367–9). According to this image participants in Practical Theology research may not be understood as “isolated, self-reflective subjects, but in terms of subject positions to be negotiated amid webs of interest, power and influence” (Brown, 2012, p.119). Our tools of interpretation will therefore need to be expanded to suit the exploration of webs of diverse influences.

Conclusion

I began this chapter with a study of hermeneutical Practical Theology as the conceptual framework offering an overarching theoretical landscape for this research. The chapter ends with a new understanding of how the use of this framework would shape this research. Firstly, I became aware how many diverse theoretical perspectives were likely to inform the context, self-understanding, speech, and listening of both researcher and the research participants in this study. Then, I understood how among those theoretical perspectives certain perspectives would be culturally dominant, assuming positions of power, while other perspectives would be neglected or squeezed out of the frame. It would therefore be helpful to choose research tools, both theoretical and methodological, to assist me to hear the less dominant voices, as well as those with greater power, in the contexts of my research participants’ lives. Vitally, for this research, I understood my own central position of power as interpreter of the meanings expressed by others. I would consider, therefore, not only the dominant and less strident voices forming the mind of research participants, but also those forming my own mind and history. I realised, gradually, how the tools used to research meaning in the lives and experiences of others would also explore and challenge the meanings I gave to my

own life. I would need to find methods of being alert to these myriad strands of meaning, and to become accustomed to tools of self-reflexivity to become increasingly aware of my own role in making interpretations.

In the next two chapters I turned to the language and theology of marriage, and to queer theory and theology, as research tools to help me detect layers of meaning in research participants' accounts of civil partnership, hoping that these would assist me to find neglected as well as dominant themes. Concerned about how the many voices to be discovered might be held together, or at least held in creative tension with each other, I end this chapter by recalling that one focus of practical theology is to critically "complexify" and explore situations. Swinton and Mowat define this complexification in a way congruent with the methodological and philosophical understanding of hermeneutics:

To complexify something is to take that which at first glance appears normal and uncomplicated and through a process of critical reflection at various levels, reveal that which is in fact complex and polyvalent. (2006, p.13)

I now begin to complexify understandings of civil partnership by examining the critical lens of the language and theology of marriage, in Chapter 4, and of queer theory and theology, in Chapter 5.

Chapter 4.

The Language and Theology of Marriage

“The subject was the human being who, searching for truth, questioning, doubting, and hoping, conscious of the problems of a new era, tried to stand on his or her own spiritual feet.”
(Heitink, 1991, p.29)

Introduction

Heitink uses this sentence, quoted in the previous chapter concerning the hermeneutic nature of this enquiry, to describe the development of the use of subjective reflection and rational deliberation to question authoritarian faith, and to create new understandings of religion and church, at the time of the Enlightenment. This research may be described as a study of that process of trying to stand. Gay and lesbian Christians, “searching for truth, questioning, doubting and hoping”, are conscious that their search takes place against a rapidly shifting backdrop of social change. Nowhere is such change likely to be experienced more keenly than in receiving the changing legal terminology used to describe their long-term relationships of intimacy and commitment. While marriage remains the most commonly used description for relationships of enduring intimate adult relationships, and therefore likely to provide a significant model in interviewees’ descriptions of their partnerships, only recently has the institution of marriage been available to gay and lesbian couples seeking a legal framework of reference for their own relationships.

The use of the title “Faith on a Landslide” for the introduction to this research describes my dizzying experience of grasping footholds in the midst of a rapidly changing cultural and legal landscape. In 1957, when I was three years old, the Wolfenden Committee recommended the decriminalisation of homosexual acts performed privately between two men who had reached the age of 21. Ten years later, when I was entering puberty and wondering doubtfully if I would ever be married, the subsequent Sexual Offences Act changed life overnight both legally and socially for those living secretly in homosexual partnerships. In 2006, after a lifetime of coming to terms with not being married, finding myself instead in a long-term committed lesbian partnership, following the passing by the United Kingdom Parliament of the Civil Partnership Act 2004, I entered a civil partnership. As I reflected on that rite it seemed quite unexpectedly on the day itself, and in its future implications, very like a marriage. On 17th July 2013, the Marriage (Same-Sex Couples) Bill received Royal Assent, so that by now, at sixty, I could choose to be married. These changes in law, reflecting and

encouraging increased tolerance of homosexuality in wider society, affect participants selected to take part in this research, the Church to which they belong, and me, the writer, in different, overlapping ways.

In 2010, when this research began, there was not yet any clear sign that the government was about to open a process of consultation concerning civil marriage for same-sex couples. That consultation proceeded while the research took place in 2012, so was likely to influence the language participants used in assigning meaning to civil partnership. In 2015, by the time the research discourses were analysed, civil marriage for gay and lesbian couples had become a reality which was likely to influence my mind in that analysis and my interpretation of those discourses. The Church of England, meanwhile, has been slow to construct theology around civil partnership and even more reluctant to extend the theology of marriage to same-sex relationships. This gap leaves gay and lesbian Christians who are members of mainstream churches with an experience of being sharply out of step, or of falling between rocks on a landslide. I found myself hurtling along at a fast pace in terms of legal equality in civil marriage, yet unsure of places to stand within a theological understanding of marriage.

In this chapter I examine three dimensions of marriage. Firstly, I describe the ways in which marriage may be understood as a changing institution, open to the influence of the surrounding culture. Secondly I explore reactions of three mainstream Churches, including the Church of England, to the introduction of the Marriage (Same-Sex Couples) Act to the statute books of England and Wales. Thirdly, I suggest different interpretations given to the meaning of marriage in postmodern and feminist writing, and discuss the implications of these different interpretations for this research.

Developments in the history and meaning of marriage.

One theme of the novel *The Emperor Waltz* (Hensher, 2014) is passionate love. Such love, whether for artistic endeavour, for religious or political causes, or for individuals, is described by Hensher in contexts as disparate as a third century Roman outpost, Berlin in the 1930s, and a hospital in contemporary London. Marriage is described from the diverse perspectives of characters living in these varying contexts. A Christian martyr finds her pagan marriage oppressive, preferring to live in prison among believers, and to die for love of Christ, than to remain a pampered voiceless possession of her despotic husband. Both a craftsman father and his home-maker daughter marry their spouses for the sake of wealth, rather than for love, when inflation gallops, threatening starvation in its wake, in Germany between the two World Wars. In

contemporary London, a hospital patient casually mentions that the frequent male visitor to his bedside is his husband. The novel was published in 2014. It shows how there have been dynamic shifts in the nature and meaning of marriage in the West, as the institution has been adapted to changing cultural contexts.

Christianity, until recently the dominant religious influence in this nation, was born in a world shaped by Jewish and Greco-Roman thought. In the Hebrew Scriptures, a married woman was defined as her husband's property. Nevertheless, a cultural shift is discernible in these writings from an acceptance, in the stories of the patriarchs and kings, of polygamy and concubinage, to emphasise the importance of dynastic growth, to an alternative emphasis on monogamy in the centuries prior to the birth of Christ, when occupation by foreign rulers dictated an emphasis on purity of race.

Stoicism, with its suspicion of bodily passion and view of women as inferior to men, hugely influenced Greco-Roman thought about marriage in the period of the New Testament and of the early church fathers. Early Christian writing upheld the virtue of fidelity in monogamous marriage, but contained ambivalent messages about the role of both sexual activity and women in that institution. St Augustine perfectly exemplifies this ambivalence in his work *De Bono Coniugali*. Marriage, he explains, serves three "goods": the procreation of children, fidelity and permanence of the bond, while intercourse within marriage enjoyed without procreative purpose is sinful (Augustine, paras 6 and 9, 281).

Another major shift in understanding marriage took place in the twelfth century, when the Church explicitly articulated seven sacraments, of which marriage was one. While throughout the Middle Ages, all that had been required to marry was the exchange of vows which could take place anywhere, now a priest was to witness and record the exchange of vows to be sealed by a ring. Yet, under the influence of the thirteenth century theologian, St Thomas Aquinas, the subordination of women within marriage continued. For this influential scholar of Augustine and Aristotle, the special nature of woman was founded in child-bearing, so that man continued to be the principal of the race and the head of the woman.

With the Reformation yet another change in emphasis took place. Reformation liturgies, in languages understood by the people, articulated a concept of marriage as non-sacramental and fundamentally a companionate personal relationship. Alan Wilson suggests that there was a democratisation of marriage, made possible by biblical and liturgical translation, as "There was now a common vernacular form for making it." (Wilson, 2014, p.110). For Cranmer, marriage was a secular institution graced by

Augustine's three "goods". Marriage provided a remedy for sin, help and comfort for the couple, and might produce children. Interestingly, in his prayers, Cranmer was careful to support the full validity of childless marriage.

One aspect of marriage has been ignored so far, but its importance cannot be overlooked: it is the people involved who are ministers to each other of their relationship. The Church may bear witness to their intention, record their vows, and even act as gatekeeper to where the event of exchanging vows and rings may take place, but it cannot make marriages happen. This understanding becomes increasingly important as people made decisions to enter or desert their marriage, about whether to marry in Church, and about whether to become divorced.

In 1753 in England, Lord Hardwicke's Act required all marriages, except those of Quakers and Jews, to take place in the churches of the Church of England. The attempt at creating order in marriage custom, by enforcing registration after a mandatory ceremony in church, however, backfired. First, Roman Catholics and Non-Conformists were permitted to marry in their own buildings. Then, in 1857, civil marriage became possible. Finally, in 1859, the new Divorce Act made marriage more dissoluble. In all these events, a separation was widening between Church and State concerning the provision, upholding, and meaning of marriage.

In 1938, the Church of England gave new emphasis to the companionate meaning of marriage by supporting the use of contraceptive medicine. Swiftly, changes in sexual mores became more evident, so that the Church of England's Weddings Project, published in 2005, noted that research shows, "English people are now inclined to view getting married far less as the threshold of sexually active adulthood, and more as the crowning summit of a committed relationship." (Wilson, 2014, p.120).

Shifts in the cultural understanding of marriage and human sexuality paved the way for the introduction of conversations about same-sex marriage. The shift of emphasis from dynastic and property exchange to a companionate understanding of marriage was particularly significant, as was the decrease in the power of the Church to act as gatekeeper and judge over sexual mores. Perhaps equally significant was increased tolerance of homosexuality in the West, which was reflected in changes in the law.

In 2004, the Parliament of the United Kingdom passed the Civil Partnership Act (Civil Partnership Act, 2004). The Act granted civil partnerships in the United Kingdom with rights and responsibilities identical to civil marriage. The success of this legislation in terms of enhancing the status of gay and lesbian partnerships paved the way for a

vigorous campaign to gain full equality with the legalisation of same-sex marriage. Civil partnership, while conferring the same legal rights as marriage, nevertheless seemed unequal to marriage in several ways. Firstly, civil partnerships were not open to heterosexual couples, so in effect civil partnerships identified the sexual orientation of civil partners. In writing documents, such as application forms for education, employment or housing, this caused a sort of enforced “outing” of sexual orientation. Secondly, United Kingdom citizens in civil partnerships living abroad do not enjoy the benefits of marriage in countries where same-sex marriage already exists. Thirdly, civil partners do not enjoy by law the same pension rights as married people. Lastly, there is a significant difference in the formal celebration itself. Words of declaration and contract are expressed in public during a civil marriage ceremony. For a civil partnership to be registered, no words need be exchanged at all and the signing of the register may take place simply in the presence of a registrar with two witnesses. While couples may choose to create their own rites to celebrate civil partnership, some bearing similarities to marriage, the legal essence of such registration is simply the private signing of a document before a registrar and two witnesses. Civil partnership is a legal contract, regularising the sharing of property and financial matters, with no depth of meaning necessarily expressed about the nature of the relationship so designated.

A government consultation on equal marriage was held in 2012. Fifty-three per cent of its 228,000 respondents agreed that civil marriage should become available to all couples, regardless of gender. Forty-six per cent disagreed and one per cent made no clear response. The Marriage (Same-Sex Couples) Bill was introduced into Parliament on 24th January 2013 and received Royal Assent on 17th July 2013, having secured large majorities in both Houses of Parliament. Another shift had taken place in the secular understanding of marriage, but what was the official response of the institution which creates the context of this research, namely the Church of England?

Same-Sex Marriage: The Response of the Church of England.

The Church of England considers itself to be both catholic and reformed in theology and ecclesiology. Before studying its official statements concerning same-sex marriage, it is helpful, therefore, to briefly outline responses made in those traditions. The official responses of both the Roman Catholic Church and the United Reformed Church—the latter chosen as one example of the reformed tradition in Great Britain—throw light on the response of the Church of England. It is also important to recognise, however, that theologians writing as church members may write with very different views from those

found in official statements, and so also have influence over the views of both researcher and research participants.

The official view of the Roman Catholic Church towards same-sex unions is unambiguous. The English text of the report of the Synod on the Family, which was published on 30th October 2014, contained the words, “There are absolutely no grounds for considering homosexual unions to be in any way similar to or even remotely analogous to God’s plan for marriage and the family.” (Vatican Report of the Synod on the Family, 2014). The words are a quotation from an earlier document, released by the Vatican on 31st July 2003, which condemned the legalisation of same-sex marriages and called upon Catholic politicians to vote against it (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, accessed 31st July 2014).

The catechism of the Roman Catholic Church states that marriage between a man and a woman reflects God’s design in creation. Genesis 1 and the Sixth Commandment are understood to signify a call to full sexual integration by accepting our sexual identity as male and female. Our human sexual identity is understood in the catechism to reach its full expression in relationships of gender complementarity. Sex is understood to be given by God for pleasure in marriage and particularly to reach its purpose in the procreation of children. Neither homosexual acts, nor the relationships containing them, are to be approved since they are contrary to this natural law, are not procreative, and possess neither affective nor sexual complementarity. Natural law and the scriptures are not understood as expressions of culture, but as divine revelation discernible by reason. This is clearly expressed in the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council report, “*Gaudium et Spes*”:

All evolution of morals and every type of life must be kept within the limits imposed by the immutable principles based upon every human person’s constitutive elements and essential relations—these elements and relations transcend historical contingency. (Pastoral Constitution on the Church and the Modern World, 1965)

Such understandings of gender and sexuality, of same-sex unions and marriage, are not shared by all Catholics. Margaret Farley is a past president of the Catholic Theological Society of America. She supports same-sex marriage as a matter of justice, arguing in *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (2010) that gay and lesbian people may have exactly the same need as heterosexual people for their relationships to be incorporated into the ordinary life of church and society. For Farley, writing as a Catholic feminist theological ethicist, same-sex relationships and activities can be

justified according to the same sexual ethic as heterosexual relationships. We shall return to Farley as a feminist ethicist in this chapter.

The United Reformed Church is the largest mainstream Christian denomination in Great Britain to permit the blessing of same-sex civil unions in its churches, as it did in 2011. Its General Assembly is presently conducting a consultation with its constituent congregations over same-sex marriage, having failed to arrive at consensus over the issue in July 2014.

The United Reformed Church is Trinitarian and Calvinist in theology so that it seeks orthodoxy in conformity with the Bible rather than with the Magisterium or with Church Tradition. While key policy decisions about the life and direction of the denomination are made by a General Assembly, each congregation is governed by its own church meeting, so that the character of congregations may be very differently nuanced in terms of life and belief.

Consensus over same-sex marriage failed because a tension became clear between those who believe that it is a matter of biblical truth that sexuality can only be properly expressed between a man and a woman in marriage and those who believe that there is equal biblical authority for believing that God is gracious and welcoming regardless of sexuality and calls some people into same-sex relationships. Two principles guide future discussion: the faithfulness of each church member to listening to Jesus Christ as the only head of the Church, and the Gospel imperative to live together in unity with difference. These two principles underline current discussion, whose purpose is not to agree about same-sex marriage, but about how to live in fruitful faithful disagreement.

It is possible to see the influence of conservative biblical interpretation, as well as the influence of Natural Law theory, encouraging the flourishing of gender complementarity and procreation, as the true purposes of marriage, in the official statements of the Church of England.

The Pastoral Statement from the House of Bishops in response to the Civil Partnership Act 2005 (Church of England, 2005) made a sharp distinction between civil partnership and marriage. Civil partnership was not to be understood as a form of marriage. Neither lay people nor clergy could be forbidden to enter such legal covenants, certainly, but they were not to be understood to give permission for sexual relations outside marriage. Marriage between a man and a woman was to be understood as a creation ordinance, showing God's gift and God's grace, to be central to the stability and health of human society, and to provide the best possible context for the raising of children.

Nine years later, in response to the government consultation on the future of civil partnership following the Marriage (Same-Sex Couples) Act, the Church of England found greater approval for civil partnership (Church of England, 2014). Greater emphasis now lay on its usefulness as a social and legal framework for the honouring and recognition of same-sex partnerships. It should be retained precisely because it is not marriage and gives space to same-sex couples who hold a traditional Christian understanding of marriage (and presumably also of sex). Nevertheless, the use of Church of England buildings as places of registration remained denied, nor was there to be written an authorised liturgy of blessing or thanksgiving following civil partnership. Despite the sense of greater approval offered for the right ordering of same-sex relationships legally and financially, these further prohibitions underline the sense that civil partnership is not to be celebrated socially and liturgically as the full joining of persons, body, soul and spirit.

The House of Bishops Pastoral Guidance on Same-Sex Marriage (Church of England, 2014) made it clear that the Church of England understanding and doctrine of marriage remain unchanged. Therefore, there are to be offered no acts of worship following same-sex marriages, nor are gay and lesbian clergy to marry, since at ordination they agree to accept the discipline of the Church and to respect the authority exercised within it. As if to underline this teaching, the first priest openly to enter a same-sex marriage had his licence to officiate as a priest withdrawn in the diocese in which he gained a new position of employment (Davies, 2014, p.9).

Nevertheless, the Church of England, like the United Reformed Church, remains committed to ongoing consultation around the issue of same-sex relationships and to the exploration of living with difference. Professionally facilitated conversations, in which issues of confidentiality and power imbalance were to be addressed, were recommended for widespread consultation across the dioceses in 2014, and to be repeated in closed discussion between General Synod members in July 2016.

What remains strangely absent from these Church of England statements is any indication that the Church's attitudes on sexuality, marriage and related questions have changed over the last 2,000 years. There is little attention given to the dynamic quality of developments in the institution of marriage, or to the work of contemporary theologians who explore these developments (Rogers, 1999, 2002; Thatcher, 2003, 2012). Some of these developments, described above, are due to the ways in which tradition is formed by culture, to the different questions brought to the texts of the Bible by the events of different periods of history, and to belief in the incarnation, that the life

of the world is an ongoing creation of God.

These developments are described, and alternative views therefore offered, by two senior Church of England clergy, Dean Jeffrey John and Bishop Alan Wilson. In 1993, John published a short book (the original version of the text re-edited and published in 2012), *Permanent, Faithful, Stable: Christian Same-Sex Partnerships*. In this book, John argues that it would benefit both the Church of England in its mission to the outsider, and the largely secular community of gay and lesbian people in the West lacking a moral framework for sexual relationships, for marriage as understood in the Bible and the tradition of the Church to be extended to gay and lesbian couples (2012, pp.3–4). While accepting that unequal relationships between men and women have been exploitative of women, he insisted that inequality need not be built in to marriage (p.18). Gay and lesbian couples, expressing complementarity and mutuality in ways not reliant on gender differentiation, might indeed ease the transition towards marriage as an institution of equality (p.34). John interpreted marriage as a sacramental sign of God's covenant of love with his people, a place where partners may learn to transcend their own boundaries in love for the other, just as Christ gave his own life for the life of the Church (p.35). He saw no reason, from his own personal and pastoral experience of partnership, why gay and lesbian couples should not demonstrate this love, or receive the Church's sacramental support and blessing in doing so. The biblical texts which appear to condemn homosexuality he found unconvincing as, firstly, they are few, secondly all target different forms of behaviour, and thirdly they demonstrate no understanding of homosexuality as life-long orientation of body and mind. For John, it is far more important to follow the moral thrust of Jesus's just actions towards all, particularly those who may be excluded by the social and religious mores of the particular time and culture in which they find themselves.

Wilson is persuaded by late twentieth-century research in biology and the social sciences to believe that the sexual dimension of being human should be understood as diverse, ambiguous and deeply personal rather than as simply binary. He argues that at least four elements, themselves varied and multi-layered in texture, are joined in our sexual identity. These elements are our biological sex, our sexual orientation, our gender identity, and our gender expression. To be homosexual or lesbian is but one variation among very many.

He suggests that to open marriage to gay and lesbian people is to underline moral standards already sought by Christians in opposite-sex marriage: standards of permanence, stability, mutual love and fidelity. Wilson understands the institution of

marriage to be evolving away from the role of societal regulator of sexual behaviour towards that of “relational gold standard”, and is intrigued by the resonances of this modern evolution with the teachings of St Augustine and John Milton about the importance of companionship in marriage (2014, p.163). He suggests that precisely because neither social approval nor hierarchical power have dictated the shape of lesbian and gay partnerships, the self-giving love expressed and explored there for its own sake reflect the values of the Kingdom of God. Rather than diminishing or demeaning the spiritual meaning of heterosexual marriage, same-sex marriage may clarify, deepen and refresh its meaning for a new generation (2014, p.164).

Modern Perspectives on Marriage

While the writer and research participants absorb ideas about their relationships from church statements, other sources also influence our thinking. My career in counselling and social work, prior to priesthood, provided a context in which intimate relationships were valued for their capacity to support the self-realisation of the individual, while my identification with the women’s movement in the Church encouraged my study of Feminist Theology and the feminist critique of Christian traditions. Postmodern and feminist concepts influenced me, as I considered my own personal identity and my hopes of relationships with others. They provide alternative ways of understanding marriage.

In his work *The Transformation of Intimacy* (1992), Anthony Giddens suggests we are participants in a sexual revolution. His argument is clustered around three main concepts. These concepts are: sexuality which is plastic; the “pure relationship”; and “confluent love”.

Sexuality which is plastic is sexuality severed from integration with reproduction, kinship and intergenerational care (Giddens, 1992, p.27). It is released from reproduction by contraceptive medicine, by new techniques in reproductive technology, and by the emancipation of women from overarching male dominance in society and intimate relationships. It is loosed from pre-ordained shapes, from having meaning within bonds of kinship and intergenerational care by being reified, becoming a possession of the individual. Giddens suggests that gay liberation is partly responsible for this understanding of sexuality as a property of the self. A person is now understood to “have” a sexuality to be examined and interrogated.

Giddens understands a pure relationship (p.58) to be a new phenomenon rendered possible particularly by the freedoms gained by women to regulate contraception and to

provide for their own economic independence. Pure relationships are marked by the freedom to make choices about the financial, emotional and social benefit to each partner of entering and maintaining the relationship. This freedom to choose expresses a vital difference between traditional and present-day marriage, as Giddens understands it, and underlies the democratising possibilities of what Giddens calls “the transformation of intimacy”. Mutual decision making about the conditions necessary for a relationship to succeed is important not just at the beginning of the relationship but throughout. “Love here develops to the degree to which intimacy does, to the degree to which each partner is prepared to reveal concerns and needs to the other and to be vulnerable to that other” (p.64)

Giddens speaks of confluent love in this context of ongoing relationship and contrasts it with romantic love (p.61–64). The romantic love which became diffused through much of the social order in the nineteenth century, not least through the “romances”, which were the first forms of literature to reach a mass population, presumes a degree of self-interrogation. How do I feel about the other, and how does the other feel about me, were vital questions to ask. Gradually such an emphasis, in Giddens’ view, detached individuals from wider social circumstances by providing the “couple” with both a long-term life trajectory and a history shaped in a special way which gave it primacy over other aspects of family organisation. Such a relationship required a “meeting of souls” which was understood to heal a lack or flaw in the personality of each party to the relationship. Confluent love, on the other hand, demands less acceptance of the idea of “lack” and more willingness to give equally within a relationship, especially in terms of self-communication and sexual relating. Confluent love is active, contingent love, which cuts across ideas of “forever” or “one and only”. Confluent love presumes equality in emotional and sexual give and take, and develops to the degree to which intimacy develops, to the degree to which each partner is willing to reveal concerns to the other and to be vulnerable to the other.

Giddens suggests that tradition has been swept aside as a powerful creator and container of the meaning of relationships. Instead, it is the narrative of the self which individuals create that assumes great importance. As personal choice defines who the person “is”, the principle of autonomy becomes central to the development of Giddens’ thought. He owes his understanding of autonomy to David Held who defines it like this:

Individuals should be free and equal in the determination of the conditions of their own lives: that is, they should enjoy equal rights (and accordingly equal obligations) in the specification of the framework which generates and

limits the opportunities open to them, so long as they do not deploy this framework to negate the rights of others. (Held, 1986, p.271)

In their decision making about civil partnership it will be interesting to discern whether research participants demonstrate a sense of creating their own lifestyle, and of weighing up the authority of the Church as portrayed in its official statements against their own need for autonomy and self-determination. Analysis of discourses may highlight where the authority and influence of the Church now lies with regard to the personal lives of individuals who may seek freedom to determine their own path, not least in circumstances in which the Church itself may appear to suppress personal freedom and self-expression.

Giddens demonstrates how social and social-scientific knowledge loosened the hold of traditional sexual mores and how that which had been considered universally held became relativized. Part of this loosening was due to changes in women's self-understanding taking place in the West in the twentieth century. These changes followed and were informed by women's emancipation, the entry of women into worlds of work considered the domain of men in two world wars, and perhaps above all by the discovery and availability of contraceptive medicines, which, for the first time, placed the processes of sexual reproduction under women's control. Farley describes how the rise of self-consciousness in women undermined essentialist understandings of gender and sexual identity which did not resonate with women's experience of their own lives: "Double standards, oppressive and repressive gendered social and political patterns, male interpretations of female sexual capacities, medical and social experts' identification of impossible ideals and destructive roles—women's experience of all these have led to a radical questioning of traditional sexual beliefs and behaviours" (2010, p.6).

Feminist theorists have used diverse approaches, aiming to correct deficiencies in understanding which have harmed women in the past, and in doing so have changed the landscape of our thinking about sex and gender. Some have de-emphasised gender (Nussbaum, 1995; Cahill, 1996). Others have re-valued women's bodies as gendered and different, offering new insights into the variety of human embodiment (Irigaray, 1977, 1993). Still others have made powerful postmodern proposals regarding the social construction of bodies per se (Butler, 1990). Feminist thinkers have given the oppression of women a hermeneutical function. They have not denied the pain of women but used it as a vantage point to interpret history and to critique cultural norms.

This re-evaluation of history and of cultural norms from the viewpoint of women

gave birth to feminist theology, since religious traditions do not escape but regularly reinforce traditional gender assumptions. While there is no one definitive form of feminist theology, it is important to note how women have grasped the opportunity of giving priority to their own experience of life and faith without necessarily looking to the past for some kind of justification. This prioritisation of experience has permitted them to “rely on themselves for understanding the God they have found to be theirs” (Loades, 1990, p.2), while struggling to eliminate the androcentric emphasis in faith. Feminist hermeneutics has challenged old and new interpretations of the Bible, seeking both lost material about women and new possibilities for interpretation within a living tradition. Of particular relevance for this research is feminist theologians’ analysis of patterns of relationships, including marriage, which have served to marginalise women even as women themselves co-operate in those relationships (p.3).

Margaret Farley and Patricia Mullins are feminist theologians concerned to reinterpret marriage. Their aims and professional contexts are quite different. Farley is an established author and academic who taught at Yale Divinity School from 1971 to 2007 where she held a Chair in Christian Ethics. In her work *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* she takes seriously the social construction of identity, understanding how sexual norms have been conditioned not by the essentially human but by social forces (Farley, 2010, p.2). Given that both sex and gender have become unstable, debateable categories, the question becomes urgent for her: “With what kinds of motives, under what sorts of circumstances, in what forms of relationships, do we render our sexual selves to one another in ways that are good, true, right and just?” (p.207). She creates an ethical framework around doing no unjust harm, enjoying freedom of choice, emphasising mutuality, exercising equality of power, commitment which gives time and space for the integration of all life’s important aspects, fruitfulness in terms of the ongoing building of the human community, and social justice. This framework supports her critique of marriage understood as self-sacrifice or “total gift” of one to the other (p.266), while permitting her to ask what should characterise same-sex unions (p.272) rather than whether they can be ethically justified at all.

Mullins is a freelance writer and speaker in Australia. In her work *Becoming Married: Towards a theology of marriage from a woman’s perspective*, Mullins used the anguish she experienced in her own marriage as a vantage point to critique essentialist interpretations of gender and traditional theologies of marriage expressed in her own religious tradition of Roman Catholicism (Mullins, 2000, p.10). Finding herself

exhausted and ill after the birth of many children, faithfully attempting to conduct a sexual relationship with her husband without use of contraceptive medicine, she began to question whether it was possible for marriage to flourish in the context of Catholic teaching that sexual intercourse should have at once both a procreative and unitive function for the couple (p.148). She found herself drawn to the expression of mutuality in relationship she found in feminist theology, and to gathering other Catholic women together to hear their unvoiced stories about their actual rather than idealised experiences of marriage (p.9).

From her examination of marriage, she creates both a changed model of marriage and a new interpretation of the experience of God in marriage. She gives central importance in the relationship dynamic of marriage not to unity, but to “becoming married” by ongoing bonding, differentiation and establishing authentic equality-in-intimacy (p.54). Our bodiliness, far from cutting us off from the knowledge of God, is the place where we make peace with our limits, knowing ourselves, yet also reach beyond ourselves to the knowledge of another and of God. She understands seven aspects of marriage to be effective signs of sacramentality: public commitment; awareness of limitation; faithfulness; everydayness; sex; openness to change over time; variety of its forms. These aspects are understood by Mullins from a feminist and grounded perspective rather than being interpreted cerebrally and in a spiritualised manner. Rejecting the official teaching of her church concerning the experience of God in marriage, in this research she assumes responsibility to discern her own experience of God, and finds that struggle for discernment repeated by other people of faith (p.42).

The work of these two very different feminist writers is described not so much to compare the content of their research, but to demonstrate their use of the feminist hermeneutical principle. They have used the experience of women to critique traditional theologies of marriage and to create for themselves new theological perspectives, closer to their own experience and more relevant to their own ethical and social situations of urgency. This method of testing traditional theological categories and creating new theological constructions based on personal experience also lies at the heart of this research. For Christian theology concerning intimate long term committed relationships to be inclusive of all humanity, it is important that the lesbian and gay voice be included in the creation of that theology. This research forms a small part of that witness. In the next chapter, what a lesbian and gay—or “queer”—hermeneutical principle may look like is examined in an exploration of Queer Theology.

Conclusion

In this review of literature concerning marriage I have retraced my own footsteps through childhood and adulthood. My formative years were spent in an isolated rural community of conservative Christian views. Sex outside marriage was completely taboo. Women achieved adult status by being married and bearing children, and for the most part remaining at home in farm or cottage. To be single, not to be affirmed by men as sufficiently desirable for marriage, was to have missed the point of being female, and to be the butt of sometimes gentle, sometimes cruel humour. I gained a boyfriend quickly in my teenage years to avert these horrors, but fell behind in self-esteem as I grew away from my local peers at school and university. Church became a haven for me, a place where creativity and leadership skills flourished and the pressure decreased to perform well sexually.

Through university and early employment, contradictory experiences rendered me always slightly depressed until I discovered feminism in my late twenties. I had noticed that, in my parents' marriage, my mother was emotionally dissatisfied, yearning to have been saved from adult responsibility by a heroic male partner, yet in reality better educated and earning more than my father. I was confused that my own main affective relationships were with women rather than with men. I received offers of marriage while realising that I had no distinct and happy sense of myself flourishing within those relationships. Throughout these years, the Church of England remained a fruitful place of belonging for me, where I wanted to live my professional life. Yet that choice too created conflict for me, since I enjoyed and excelled in training for ministry, yet was unable as a woman to be ordained priest.

In the 1980s, in circles of women exploring feminist theology, I discovered both my place to stand in theological integrity, and my own lesbian identity. As I grew older and more experienced in ministry, by carefully choosing certain Church posts, I was able to survive being both lesbian and ordained.

The experience of entering a civil partnership, however, challenged me to think about marriage and its meaning, since celebrating the rite effected a consolidation of my relationship with a partner at so many levels of identity that it was hard for me to distinguish myself from those around me who were married. As I explore the theological meaning of civil partnership and same-sex marriage in my own life, and in the lives of those to whom I minister, I realise following the model of feminist theology, that we can use our own "outsider-ness" to critique those theological traditions which exclude gay and lesbian Christians from theological reflection about the material of

their own lives. In her work *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (1987, pp.116–123, 146–155, 174–180), Sallie McFague argues for a “conversion of consciousness” as we move away from theological models which ignore or silence our experience, towards the creation of new models and hermeneutical lenses which give our awareness voice and shape. The experience of being excluded by the Church’s official statements concerning long-term committed relationships and marriage may act as a vantage point to create new theological perspectives. One such perspective is Queer Theology, which is explored, together with my understanding of my own outsider vantage point, in the next chapter.

Chapter 5. Queer Theology

All theology is a kind of birthday
Each one who is born
Comes into the world as a question
For which old answers
Are not sufficient.

From *Untitled Poem* by Thomas Merton

My family have created a myth about how I learned to walk. Worried that as I approached my second birthday, I appeared to prefer “sledging”, on my bottom and one hand, to walking upright, my parents, on the advice of a kindly doctor, bought me a woolly horse on a sturdy wheeled frame. Excitedly opening this on Christmas morning, I defied expectations by picking up the heavy object, opening my grandmother’s bedroom door, and walking carefully with it in my arms across her room to deposit it on her bed for attentive inspection. It was not that I couldn’t walk, but that by choice I approach “the new” slowly and only when all alternative avenues have been explored and discarded.

I begin this chapter with such a story because when I commenced the research I was unfamiliar with Queer theory and theology, and therefore detect in my wrestling with this chapter something of that infant’s ambivalence. I approached reading Queer theology with considerable excitement. Both I and my interviewees exist as individual atoms, embedded in a social and theological world where Queer theology is one important strand of self-expression and shared exploration for many gay and lesbian Christians. In my role as a lesbian feminist activist priest within the Church of England, I had encountered three of the UK’s leading queer theologians—Marcella Althaus-Reid, Lisa Isherwood and Elizabeth Stuart—sometimes sharing the same platform at conferences. I eagerly anticipated learning what insights their work might bring to my own research. At the same time, I questioned why in my late fifties I do not readily call myself “Queer”, why I have not read their work in depth, and where this research journey may be leading. This phase of the research journey has been painful, though productive, as this chapter will show. If my woollen horse-on-wheels is Queer Theology, and the GP the study supervisor who urged me to read it, then my grandmother, or “fairy godmother”, where I looked for soothing explanation of this new mystery, turned out to be, unexpectedly, the artist R.B. Kitaj (Lamberth, 2013).

I grew up in a part of rural England so isolated in the 1950s and 60s that a whiff of Thomas Hardy's Dorset lingered. In that environment, the word "queer" meant strange or odd, and only in late adolescence did I register it as a derogatory term used of men suspected of being homosexual. How did the same word become an expression of empowerment, and a descriptor of a type of critical theory and theology? No-one is certain, but the development, perhaps beginning in the coalition of people of all sexualities forced into co-operation by the Aids crisis, was complete by the late 1980s when gay and bisexual activist groups coined the title "Queer Nation" and their slogan, "We're here! We're queer! Get used to it!"

By the late 1980s I was engaged in the feminist movement within the Church of England and was nervously exploring my identity as lesbian. Again, in terms of feminism, I was slow to immerse myself in reading. A lack came first: no ordination to the priesthood for me or my female friends, though I had been a leading student, sometimes given opportunities to teach, at theological college. From the lack came a plethora of support groups in which I joyfully and enthusiastically entered "consciousness", which Nelle Morton describes in *The Journey Is Home*:

To be conscious is always to be conscious of something. In the case of the new woman it is the coming to awareness of herself, her identity as a human person with the rights, responsibilities and potentials thereof in light of her unexamined, traditionally accepted position in present and historical social situations. This consciousness can best be identified in the new language of the sisterhood. (Morton, 1985, p.13)

By 1994, I had sufficiently understood the ways in which I had been "heard into speech" to contribute to a collection of essays considering the boundary breaking which women's ordination might bring (Herbert, 1994). Not for nothing was my essay in this collection called "A Resounding Silence". This title represented my own understanding of the power of words, and of the power of those chosen to speak, to create reality. Two years later I had moved to London from the West Country, was teaching Feminist Theology at a spirituality centre for women on Tottenham Court Road, and grappling with the issue of how to use my ordination to priesthood in the Church of England.

The need for social and spiritual support, coupled with the need to speak, similarly accompanied my coming out as a lesbian within the Church of England. From the lack came a plethora of support groups and speaking opportunities which undergirded my work as a parish priest in Soho and resulted in my working subsequently for three years full time for the national pressure group Inclusive Church. Reading only slowly caught up and then it was the reading of gay and lesbian biography

and protest which supported my emerging identity as a successful priest working at the heart of Church of England gay and lesbian protest groups. Queer theology existed at the borders of my consciousness, a dangerous, dilettante luxury for which I had no time.

So what has changed, causing a shift from that damning appraisal now? And why dangerous, why dilettante, why luxury?

The danger for me in Queer Theology is experienced at an instinctive rather than intellectual level. It lies in its apparent deconstruction of identity, its emphasis on sensuality, and its sometimes irate preaching tone. All these three perceived aspects of queer theology at some level threaten my hard-won identity as an out lesbian, within a civil partnership, yet a working priest within the Church of England who conforms sufficiently to be considered a valuable team member of the national and local church.

The first three chapters of this thesis demonstrate an interest in meaning. What meanings do gay and lesbian Christians give to their relationships of civil partnership and, particularly, what is so “meaning-full” for them in this rite and relationship that they have been enabled to break through disapproval and taboo within the church while professing to remain Christian. Chapter 3, about hermeneutics, investigated meaning and definitions as containing multiple diverse strands of resonance in terms of content, context and use. The thesis is written with the intention of discovering further meaning even while recognising meaning’s complexity. It is hard to begin to define the meaning of queer theology because “Queer” has developed a meaning of resistance to all closed definitions. The very essence and usefulness of the word to some queer theologians is precisely its non-definition.

Queer theology borrows language and methodology from queer theory. Queer theory is concerned to explore the ways in which heterosexuality is deemed normative in our society. It asks the question how homosexuality is constructed in many cultures as abnormal. In early dialogue, some LGBT theologians simply aligned queer with being LGBT. I was influenced by these writers who, like early feminist theologians, discovered “places to stand” in biblical and liturgical texts (Ruether, 1993). I remember reading a Gospel passage re-scripting the woman bent double before Jesus as a lesbian caught in the silence of homophobic intolerance, at a large public service for LGBT Christian protesters gathered to welcome Bishop Gene Robinson to this country in 1996. Tears streamed down my face as I realised the enormity of what I was doing. Never before, in a life-time of approximately 10,000 church services attended or performed, had the Bible specifically addressed me in public in terms of my sexual orientation. Some of these early queer theologians, like John McNeil and Troy Perry,

adopted an essentialist stance to suggest that being born gay they had been created not sinful but whole by God (McNeill, 1976; Perry, 1972). Other writers' focus was on embodiment, and the ways LGBT love expresses God's love (Goss, 1993). These writers were working through the years in which I was battling to become a woman priest, to find a suitable place of employment and life in the system, and to discover my lesbian identity. They spoke a language I understood of finding places to stand within orthodoxy.

Yet queer theology developed also along other lines. Some queer theologians, following critical theorists like Judith Butler, argued against the usefulness of concepts like "being born gay". Butler had been influenced by post-structuralist writers like Derrida and Foucault, who argued that the subjective sense of self is neither stable nor discrete, but constructed by meshes of discourse going on all around us. Finding support for their work in Butler's theory that gender and sexuality are both social constructions and "performed" rather than innate (Butler, 1990), later queer theologians questioned why Church and society endorse certain social constructions of sexuality and not others. Other writers like Lisa Diamond (2008) went on to ask whether the nature of human sexuality is definable at all. Diamond's work *Sexual Fluidity* demonstrates the results of research into non-exclusivity in attractions among women, changes in attraction over the life-cycle, and the capacity for attraction to be person-centred rather than gender-centred (Diamond, 2008, p.90). Using the idea of the non-definability of human sexuality, other queer theologians, such as Althaus-Reid and Isherwood (2007), have stretched the concept of queer to develop a theology which is deconstructive of theological orthodoxy. They suggest that orthodoxy has been used to reinforce oppressive norms of heteronormative authority. For them a queer God challenges all human boundaries of "power-in-possession", all suggestions of fixed categories of human language and description.

I have sensed queer theology in its development to be dangerous for me to absorb, since I have spent many years of my life constructing a liveable and employable social self. The battle for this integration has been "titanic" in terms of both my mental health and resources used in psychoanalytic psychotherapy. The health which I now enjoy began with my making a choice, deciding upon a known identity, allowing myself to belong to a category of persons known as lesbian, no matter what that meant in terms of a protesting stance and lost preferment within the institution of my employment. I have, if you like, stared into an abyss of indecision and a chaos of lack of definition and turned away from both, in order to create and sustain bonds of affection and spaces of

belonging for myself. Lack of definition appears, at an instinctive level to me, to be a dilettante and luxurious choice open to those not yet in their life forced to lose by choosing, yet choosing still. In this lament of Althaus-Reid I find myself:

The historical feminist liberationists ... have not yet completely come to terms with gender issues beyond the equality paradigm. For them sexuality tends to be seen as a frivolous distraction from issues of social justice and women's rights in the Church. In a sense, they see queer theologies as a luxury which only privileged women in academia can afford to pursue. (Althaus-Reid, 2008, p.106)

For lesbians, and lesbians who are Christian particularly, our struggle to speak and to be heard, to stand up and own our identity without fear of disapproval or ridicule, remains an urgent challenge on behalf of all those women for whom remaining hidden may involve social exclusion, self-abasement, and physical abuse. As a lesbian activist, my initial reaction to queer theology is similar to that of the biblical critic Deryn Guest. Guest argues that it may be premature to adopt a gay-inclusive label such as queer, since there has not yet been sufficient time or space in scholarship dedicated to lesbian Christian hermeneutics (Guest, 2005, p.50). She suggests that the definition lesbian may be expanded beyond exclusivist terminology: "There need not be a wholesale move to queer terminology if our definition of 'lesbian' can be organised in such a way that resists the rigidity of sexual identity." (p.48).

Nevertheless, I digested Althaus-Reid's "not yet" and found myself struggling with those words in such a way as to become more open to the usefulness of queer theology for this research when I wandered around an exhibition of the work of the artist R.B. Kitaj. Here I found images which spoke more deeply to me of the useful vitality of "being queer" and "talking queer" than anything I had yet found in the pages of queer theology. I had found, if you are willing to see things this way, my grandmother, who through sheer attentiveness opened blind eyes and blocked ears. I had experienced queer theologians as unacceptably bellicose. Perhaps it was I who was angry?

I was immediately fascinated by two aspects of the work of Kitaj. I noticed that he used collage, pieces of photography and film, even texts from politics and poetry, to embed his central figures in their wider literary and political context. As the central figures, unlike in some other collage art, remained clearly and compassionately delineated in bold, beautiful colours, I saw a helpful likeness to what I might try to do in qualitative research: using human narratives and interactive research methods to focus on very particular stories. Research participants would have their own density of unique

colour but exist within and against a web of interacting sources of inspiration, situations of personal and political conflict, and reflect a spread of ideological and theological concepts, which help create their meaning. I saw my attraction to a “bricolage-montage” style of working writ large in paint by a master of twentieth century art, and therefore better understood its potential for revealing layer upon layer of meaning.

Even more forcibly, Kitaj was obsessed with the theme of the outsider. He was born in the early twentieth century in Cleveland, Ohio, the son of a Hungarian father and an American-born Russian-Jewish mother who later married Dr Walter Kitaj, a Viennese Jew. Later, as a painter, he was rejected in England for being too American and in America for spending too long in England. Perhaps seeking a culture other than his own in which to belong more deeply, he lived for considerable lengths of time in Catalonia. That area and people, whose own identity of political and cultural struggle he engaged with seriously, seemed to release in him the possibility of investigating in far greater depth his own Jewish heritage, the “Jewish Question” and Jewish Kabbala. As if from the inside, he painted the grief of the twentieth century, the Holocaust, the Spanish Civil War, the conflicts generated by Marxism, the fate of exploited and mistreated people. Among such people were prostitutes and homosexual men.

Three paintings in the exhibition stood out for me, (see Figures 2–4 below). In “If Not, Not” Kitaj makes a study of alienation and decay, depicting the gatehouse at Auschwitz and the devastated landscape in front of it. In “Self-Portrait as a Woman” he refers specifically to the public humiliation of gentile women in Nazi Germany who had taken Jewish lovers. In this picture, he places his own head on a woman’s body and owns her fate. In “Smyrna Greek (Nikos)” he paints the homosexual poet Cavafy at the door of a brothel where a prostitute wears a diaphanous skirt revealing her sexual organs. Behind her, on the stairs, the figure of Kitaj himself descends the steps of the brothel towards us.

Figure 2: Kitaj, R.B., 1975. *If Not, Not.* (Livingstone, M., 2014, Plate 98)



Figure 3: Kitaj, R.B., 1984. *Self-Portrait as a Woman* (Livingstone, M., 2014, Plate 152)

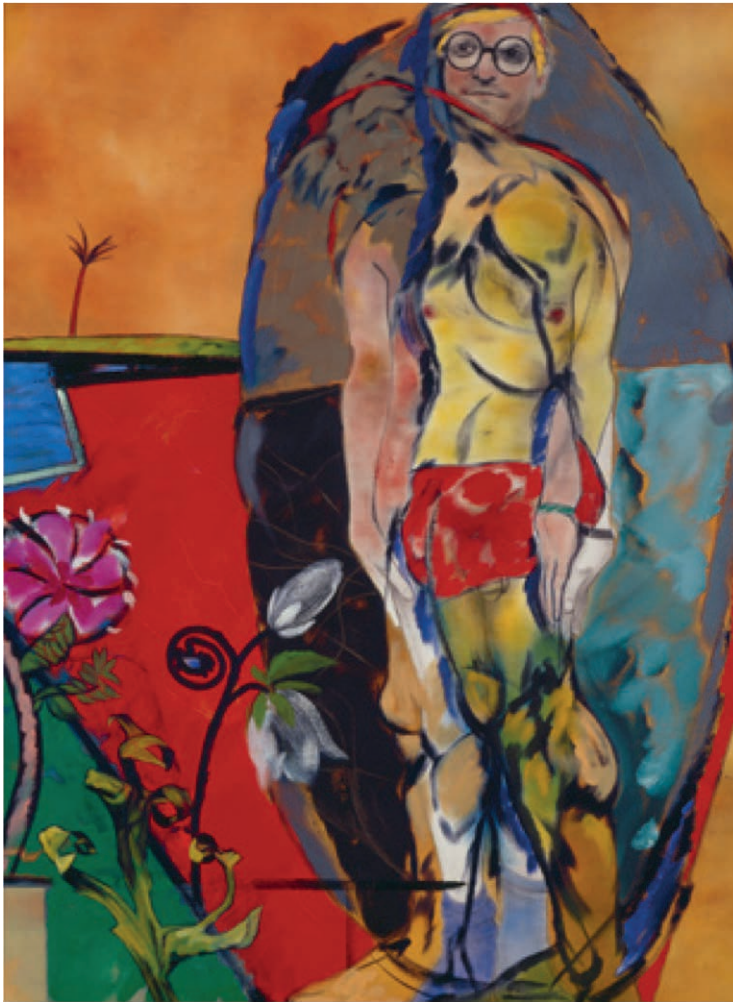


Figure 4: Kitaj, R.B., 1976–7. *Smyrna Greek (Nikos)*. (Livingstone, M., 2014, Plate 128)



Perhaps because Kitaj paints with such compassion and respect for individuals whose searching intelligence shines through, I was reminded forcibly of one of the motivations for beginning this research. I began in part to understand the gay and lesbian community of Soho, where I had previously been Rector for nine years. At St. Martin-in-the-Fields I was cocooned by the tolerance of middle class metropolitan London, and by the inclusive atmosphere of a well-heeled liberal Christian congregation, into the forgetfulness of violence towards the outsider. In Soho, I had experienced daily the plight of prostitutes and of brothel users. The murder of both was known in the neighbourhood. There, I had witnessed the pain and death resulting from a homophobic nail bomb attack. I had seen the hatred against the Church written afterwards, on our church entrance notice-board. I had led memorial service after memorial service for the gay victims of violence and HIV-related illnesses. Understanding meaning in lesbian and gay relationships requires considering that painful past too. It is part of what I bring as a researcher.

Suddenly both the violence and the compassionate inclusion of all human beings in this exhibition demanded that I look again at queer theology and its implications for this research. Queer theology demands that I ask myself the question whether I have become inured against the possible pain of concentration on “outsider-ness” and on the pressures which heteronormativity creates for gay and lesbian people. Perhaps entering civil partnerships may represent an easing of this pressure, by conforming to heterosexual norms, queer theorists might suggest? Perhaps by entering civil partnerships we outsiders may be turning insider so that we in our turn oppress people who for multiple reasons cannot or will not be so committed? From understanding the painful vantage point of queer outsider-ness, I might now ask questions like these.

It is time to examine the positive features of queer theology for this research, not least for the sake of remembering, before it is too late, our own outsider past. I will do that by examining the work of Elizabeth Stuart and Marcella Althaus-Reid, before considering the implications of their work for the content, methodology and praxis of this research.

In *Gay and Lesbian Theologies: Repetitions with Critical Difference* (2003), Stuart begins her support for the development of queer theology from the useful starting point of the Lambeth Conference 1998, cited above. For her, the failure of western bishops to stand against and dialogue with the homophobia contained in the statements of conservative churches made at this conference demonstrated the lack of potency in liberal gay theologies, and in gay and lesbian liberation theologies, to persuade

Christians of the justice of the gay cause. For her, these theologies that place sexuality at the centre of human identity are actually missing the point. They fail to create a rich theology which disturbs our image of ourselves in the light of God's existence. Always at odds with conservative views of human sexuality that are similarly fixed, they perpetuate an ongoing violent battle within the church. Queer theology takes the rug away from under this tiring, unremitting war by questioning the very notions of gender and sexual identity.

Sexual and gender identities have to be subverted because they are constructed in the context of power and are part of a matrix of dominance and exclusion. They grate against the sign of baptism. (Stuart, 2003, p.108)

Here, Stuart hints at how they are to be subverted. All our cultural identities are placed under "eschatological erasure" (p.107) in the new belonging of being Church, particularly in the rites of baptism and Eucharist. She argues that by baptism human beings receive an identity which is sheer gift, not a matter of either negotiation or performance. Baptism fills us with a desire for the endlessness which belongs to God alone and erases past longings of desire for other categories of being human which protect and exclude. The vocation of Christians is to live in such a way that culturally conditioned identities are exposed as non-ultimate, and understood to be in the process of redemption. "In the Eucharist the Church stands on the edge of heaven and, standing on the edge of heaven, gender differences dissolve." (p.112).

For Stuart both monastic celibacy and same-sex marriage are necessary for the holiness of the Church, to remind it that gender is not of ultimate concern and that desire has an end beyond human relationships. The Church needs to recover its own queer tradition in order to resolve the crisis it is in over homosexuality and because it needs to recover an eschatological vision.

Stuart identifies her work with that of other queer theologians who understand lesbian and gay identities to lack ultimate importance. These identities are cultural phenomena, practiced and configured differently in diverse cultural contexts. Michael Vasey (1995), for whom the shape of grace is discovered in the embrace of the outsider, believes gay and lesbian people may have a role to play in reminding and recalling the church to the vitality of friendship. Kathy Rudy (1997), lamenting that gay and lesbian people have become such good mimics of heterosexual families, urges the Church to consider other forms of community life, in which baptism is the common identifier. Eugene Rogers (1999), whose work will be considered in more depth in Chapters 11 and 12, like Stuart, puts ecclesial identity first. We are all, he considers, in the place of

Gentiles whom God has grafted into the vine of his people by grace. Being first the child of God is important, too, to James Alison (2001), who questions the formation of a gay identity based on resentment and anger. What these queer theologians have in common is the rejection of a metaphysic of substance. Both gender and sexual identities are deconstructed through baptismal incorporation into the Body of Christ.

Stuart sets apart, however, Marcella Althaus-Reid, whose work Stuart understands as liberation theology informed by queer theology rather than queer theology itself. Althaus-Reid uses queer theory as a tool to analyse experience, certainly, but in her work human experience remains primary.

In her work *The Queer God* (2003) Althaus-Reid uses a tiny phrase which highlights for me why I feel distinct unease reading the work of Stuart and the other theologians she considers “queer”. Althaus-Reid writes, in considering the ways in which queer discourses are silenced, “We live in a theological world where God is known by gossip—by elite gossip.” (Althaus-Reid, 2003, p.49).

It is important, following Stuart, to recognise, in the community of my work and research, the God who is always calling us out beyond our present constructions of our selves and towards the stranger at the gate. I have been fascinated to find myself increasingly keen, for example, to work with disabled people as a result of studying what inclusion means for myself as a lesbian priest. It will be vital, similarly, to consider the role the church plays in the lives of my interviewees. Yet I find Stuart’s language too confined to that of yet another closet, the closet of the Church. For me she creates an “elite gossip” of theology which excludes much of what is going on in the world. For me her God, and the role of queer theology, is too small. Ultimately, the church becomes a “world in itself,” which she addresses in ways that ignore the sometimes oppressive powers of the institution. At some final edge she appears to evade the use of queer critique to question the ecclesiastical hermeneutic.

Althaus-Reid calls herself “a material girl” and queer theology a materialist theology which takes bodies seriously. “The search for love and for truth is a bodily one. Bodies in love add many theological insights to the quest for God and truth...” (2003, p.2)

She begins with the human experience of bodily love in the same way that liberation theologians began theology for social transformation with the work of members of politically and economically oppressed communities. Examining this experience, she defines queer theology as first-person theology which is in “diaspora” or “exile”, and which is self-disclosing, autobiographical and responsible for its own

words. Because of my history, which I have outlined above, I identify with her classification of an indecent theologian as one who “has to survive with several passports” (p.7). What I saw in Kitaj resonates with a diaspora theology, at a crossroads of issues of self-identity and the identity of the Christian community. I am seeking in my research the “biographies of sexual migrants, testimonies of real lives in rebellious modes of love, pleasure and suffering” (p.8).

Althaus-Reid does not require that queer theology disregard church traditions but suggests a process of queering which may turn them upside-down, or submit them to collage-style processes, which search for and add experiences that may have been excluded and ignored. This process of queering un-shapes and reshapes traditional theology by questioning at all times and in all ways its heterosexual hermeneutic. How does it do this? By inserting into theology stories of transgressive life and culture. An example of this is the confession of Chavela Vargas, a Mexican singer and lover of Frida Kahlo, of a lesbian lover’s “purity”:

I have never been to bed with a gentleman. Never. Look what purity! I don’t have anything to be ashamed of. My gods have made me this way. There must be a reason for that...This is the truth when you are a pure and honest homosexual. (Vargas, C., cited in Althaus-Reid, 2003, p.19)

Such stories disturb us to be honest ourselves, to admit the sheer complexity and diverse nature of all our sexual experience and consequent identity. I find in Althaus-Reid’s work the “I” who has suffered, who both addresses the church and is addressed by queer theology, and this seems glaringly omitted in the work of Stuart.

Althaus-Reid’s theology is often expressed in extreme language which I sometimes find histrionic. Her description of the kenosis as “God’s suicide”, for example, seems unhelpfully provocative when in the same paragraph she uses the analogy of “letting go” to promote the same meaning (p.57). Althaus-Reid does not create sermon notes, this—gender fucking, bisexual theology, libertine disclosures—is not pulpit language! Nevertheless, the way in which she queers hermeneutics, and uses the language of “dark alleys” to recall the scandal at the heart of Christianity, is important for this research. She gathers stories and experiences, investigates traditions to ask what has been missed here. She encourages resistance to the status quo rather than integration and acceptance. She brings a hermeneutic of suspicion to ecclesiology which resonates with my learning from the work of Habermas and of feminist theologians. Her insight is that ecclesiological hermeneutics constructs the lives of ministers, especially senior, power-wielding and language-determining ministers and

bishops. She values the role of the alien or “villain” in church life, so revealing the value of this research. “The powerful theological praxis of transformation usually comes from the direction of aliens working within the system.” (p.30).

There are likenesses between the role of interviewer in this research and what she calls “the voyeur” whose work she prizes: “Any theological praxis which seeks to save us from fixity, the obsession with coinciding with the eternal sexual ideology and the limited choice of angles, may be inspired by the voyeur.” (p.42). The voyeur, as interviewer, in defining others defines herself too, and works in a mutuality of identity construction.

Queer theology is therefore necessarily not one theology, but multiple in form and content. It creates an important hermeneutical lens for this research in terms of content, methodology and praxis. In terms of content, this research is itself queer theology, a gathering of stories about bodily love from people who themselves even in recent history have often been dismissed as not Christian, or not able to reflect God. In terms of methodology, queer theology offers an understanding of human sexual identity as unstable, constructed, and fluid. Such an understanding creates a useful tool of critique of the heteronormativity which may influence, partially or completely, Christians seeking forms and labels for their long-term relationships of intimacy. In terms of praxis, the interviewer influenced by queer theology will use questions which reveal the underlying assumptions about the sexual and Christian identity of her interviewees: what are their experiences which challenge the norm of the confinement of sexual activity to heterosexual marriage; of creating family; of identifying with the stranger? Finally, in the analysis of data, queer theology, beginning with “I”, reminds me as interviewer of the place of my own queer history in shaping and influencing conversation, and of the place of queer theology in redefining myself.

I began with a personal reminiscence. At 20 months, walking, according to my family myth, evidently felt unsafe to me as I no longer used the strength and sensitivity of the hand to feel my way, but was propelled up on to my feet, as it were, into space. Queer theology is a similar experience, unsafe and exhilarating. The writing of this chapter, placed at the end of the conceptual framework, helped me to start to find my own voice in this research, and to understand the changes within the researcher which may occur as a result of pursuing the analysis of experience using new and unfamiliar hermeneutical tools. I end this chapter with a quotation about this process of shaping from Marcella Althaus-Reid. This quotation is congruent with my role as the researcher using hermeneutic principles in my research, described in Chapter 3. It is also consonant

with feminist and queer theologians finding new places to stand alongside more dominant theological voices, as described in Chapters 4 and 5:

This is one of the most important challenges that queer theologies bring to theology in the twenty-first century: the challenge of a theology where sexuality and loving relationships are not only important theological issues but experiences which un-shape Totalitarian Theology while reshaping the theologians. (Althaus-Reid, 2003, p.8)

Part III:
Research Methods and Findings

Chapter 6.

Methodology: Pinning down the Wind

“I couldn’t quite figure out how to do wind, make a visual interpretation of wind...” (David Hockney, in Lloyd, 2014, p.25)

I have called this chapter “pinning down the wind” for two reasons. Like many practitioners, I find choosing a methodology difficult, akin to a process of painfully refining a few vague ideas into an understanding of the world and differentiating that understanding from other understandings. Its difficulty lies in the habit of many long-term practitioners not to consider the philosophical assumptions underlying their work in favour of “just getting on with it”. In compulsive busyness, I had lost the art of asking, “How do I know what I know?”

When I looked at and thought about what I was trying to do, steadily and with concentration, I came across David Hockney’s description of trying to paint the wind, in Richard Lloyd’s work *Hockney Printmaker* (Lloyd, 2014, p.25, and Plate 59d, p.101).

Figure 5: Hockney, D., 1973. *Wind* from The Weather Series, Salt Mills, Saltaire.



The experience of that discovery appears later in this chapter but I found it comforting to find him struggling in that interview to answer these questions: “How do I see what I know? How do I describe what I see? How does the audience know what I see?” The startlingly simple answer was comforting, too: look, perhaps carefully, and for a long time, and with greater concentration than usual. I could do that.

When I approached forming a research question my initial interest lay in finding out what theological, ecclesiastical and social structures silence gay and lesbian Christians in the context of their ordinary life and in the context of Church. I imagined conducting a piece of quantitative research, using a nationwide questionnaire, to unearth the silencing mechanisms I had noticed during a so-called “listening process” conducted across the Church of England in the years preceding the last Lambeth Conference of Bishops in 2008, and described in the report “The Anglican Communion and Homosexuality” (Groves, 2008). I expected the results to raise issues of just speech, of mental health, and of theology within the community of the Church of England. I imagined that a D.Prof. programme, whether by instruction or magic, was there to teach me exactly how to do this. My only reservation, expressed in my first interview with my research supervisor, was that I had noticed that questionnaires may receive an arbitrary number of responses. I no longer completed them, sensing both that the lesbian and gay Christian community of which I am a part was inundated with requests to complete questionnaires, even while we remained uncertain about just how and where the resulting information was used.

Such interests led to the creative period of reading about taboo described in Chapter 1 and to writing a successful D.Prof. Paper 1. But the challenge of writing Paper 2 revealed that I had not understood the nature of research, whether quantitative or qualitative, so imagined that individuals’ experiences in written response form could be simply and arbitrarily used to support hypotheses gained from reading. I entered then my first seemingly messy and confused period of thinking. What was I trying to do and what resources did I have to do it? While concerned by the mental health issues presented by some lesbian and gay Christians in my pastoral care, I was not trained in mental health nor in mental health research methods. I did not have the resources to create a nationwide research questionnaire project and doubted gaining useful levels of response. Far worse was handling my own deeply entrenched suspicion that “real” research collects hard, measurable facts, by randomised controlled trials, conducted as part of large quantitative research programmes. I had been a Church minister for 30 years of my life, and had preached and taught knowledge gained as mystery,

imaginative insight and relationship. Yet there was part of me seemingly utterly beguiled by positivist views of reality. Swinton and Mowat write that such assumptions are commonplace: “The idea of the ‘scientific fact’ as definitive of rigorous truth is so ‘natural’ to us that we rarely think beyond it.” (2006, p.39).

It was time to rethink the whole enterprise.

I am a priest and pastor, an activist and facilitator of conversations around issues of lesbian and gay life in the Church of England. These roles suggest a research methodology consonant with Practical Theology for which Swinton and Mowat provide this useful definition:

Practical theology is critical, theological reflection on the practices of the Church as they interact with the practices of the world, with a view to ensuring and enabling faithful participation in God’s redemptive practices in, to and for the world. (Swinton and Mowat, 2006, p.6)

Moving from an impossibly wide research focus, my own context and skills provided the discipline of Practical Theology within which to work. Ballard and Pritchard describe this discipline in ways which point to how I intended to think about silencing:

[Practical Theology] focuses on the life of the whole people of God in the variety of its witness and service, as it lives in, with, and for the world. It asks questions concerning Christian understanding, insight and obedience in the concrete reality of our existence. It is therefore a theological activity, descriptive, normative, critical and apologetic, serving both the church and the world in its reflective tasks. (Ballard and Pritchard, 1996, p.27)

Having defined the theological context of my study, a research question began to emerge. Where do the lesbian and gay Christians to whom I am pastor experience silencing and how have they dealt with it? Has their faith and theology helped them break through to a new speech, even new theology, and how might I investigate that? How have I done that in my own life? It became important to think about silence, and its breaking, not as an abstract principle but as a lived reality. In doing this I recalled words by David Hockney describing how he had painted a picture of “Wind” in his lithography set “The Weather Series,” how he had approached seeing the reality of wind. His words resonated with what I was trying to do, describing silencing and what releases us from silence.

The subject matter is drawing. The prints here of the wind, for instance, I couldn’t quite figure out how to do wind, make a visual representation of wind, because normally only the effects of wind show themselves...I was just on the beach at Malibu one day and suddenly a piece of paper blew by,

and it suddenly dawned on me, I'll simply do all the other prints I've done blowing away across Melrose Avenue... (Hockney, Stangos and Geldzahler, 1976, p.100)

As I thought about my own life I considered that the single action which had most loudly empowered me to speech as a lesbian within family, society, friendship groups and Church was to enter into the publicly recognised commitment of civil partnership, a realisation which I described in Chapter 2. What had possessed me to do that with such conviction and joy, when the Church of England was less than supportive and when future employment opportunities as a clergyperson might be jeopardised? If I could understand what theological and social taboos I and other Christians had broken through to realise civil partnership, I might understand both silence and a new theology being lived into speech.

A new piece in the jigsaw now fell into place. I had been struggling to arrange meetings with other priests across the Diocese of London with congregation members in civil partnerships. The meetings were fun but the results seemed arbitrary—what linked these people together except my question? One night, in a vivid nightmare, I found myself drifting further and further away from my place of work and belonging. Waking up suddenly, and with a jolt of cognitive insight, I knew that I must conduct my research at St. Martin-in-the-Fields where I work and belong, no matter how difficult that task might prove to be. I wanted to understand the church context of my research participants and for the church itself to engage with the research process as part of my ongoing work.

I had taken another step. A research question, sufficiently specific to complete, yet sufficiently wide to investigate theological motivation in breaking through taboo, had formed: “What meanings do gay and lesbian Christians who are Anglicans attending St. Martin-in-the-Fields give to their relationships of Civil Partnership?” I had my picture to “pin down the wind,” the arena within which to investigate silence. This research question also indicated a type of research, namely qualitative research, which was then new to me.

Denzin and Lincoln offer a helpful initial generic definition of qualitative research: “Qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them.” (2005, p.3). My research question suggested that I work in this way. I based my choice of using qualitative research methods on five considerations.

Consideration one

Firstly, qualitative research offers a phenomenological research approach, permitting exploration of deep insight into the essence of an experience. When I ask what sort of knowledge my research question is likely to elicit, as Swinton and Mowat suggest in their checklist of the features of qualitative research (2006, p.67), the initial answer is a rich description of a social phenomenon: the experience of civil partnership as it affects a small group of Anglican Christians. Epistemologically, this research relies on a social constructivist model of human knowing.

Swinton and Mowat define phenomenology in this way: “Phenomenology is a philosophy of experience that attempts to understand the ways in which meaning is constructed in and through human experience.” (p.106). Phenomenology provides a distinct challenge in the creation of a research methodology, since this approach aims to provide a rich description of lived experience without theoretical overlay. Van Manen emphasises this aspect of laying bare experience as described by the research participant, without interpretation or classification, “Phenomenology is the study of the life-world, the world as we immediately experience it pre-reflectively, rather than as we conceptualise, categorise, or reflect on it.” (1990, p.9). Moustakas (1994) underlines the usefulness to my research question of this approach, in explaining its aim of providing rich description of a person’s experience, without recourse to conceptualisations which the researcher may bring to the work. The insights provided by a phenomenological approach may nevertheless be transformative since they bring us into more direct contact with the world of the research participants, stimulating new thought and more informed action (Van Manen, 1990, p.9). Underlining the effects of creating phenomenological insight, Swinton and Mowat suggest a possible goal of transformation as a result of gaining better informed action. “Phenomenological insight, in providing deep insights and understandings into the way that things are, enables people to see the world differently, and in seeing it differently, to act differently towards it.” (2006, p.107).

Consideration two

A tension immediately presents itself. A second reason for choosing to use qualitative research to investigate the research question is that it offers an approach which is hermeneutical. Yet, how may a phenomenological approach and a hermeneutical approach be used together, and why is it important for this researcher to try to combine these two approaches.

In investigating the meanings attributed by gay and lesbian Anglicans to their relationships of civil partnership, as researcher I will not merely unearth interpretations given to events by others but also come to the research with certain interpretations of my own. I possess interpretations gathered from reading, from my own experience of faith in an Anglican context, and from my own relationship of civil partnership. Moreover, as I have argued in Chapter 3, these meaningful interpretations of both researcher and research participant are the essence of who we are. We are our own constructions of meaning, our own interpretations of ourselves, ontologically as well as epistemologically. Swinton and Mowat expand the implications of this in the context of research, “Within the research context, the practice of hermeneutics relates to making explicit and formal the ontological propensity of human beings to interpret the world.” (2006, p.108)

While both approaches assume the construction of a social world by and for reflexive human beings, agree about the significance of language, and encourage the development of understanding rather than the explanation of events, there is nevertheless a tension between the quest for description given in an unbiased way, and an approach which claims that interpretation is essential to being human in the world. A methodological easing of this tension is described by Swinton and Mowat as hermeneutic phenomenology (p.109). Here, both perspectives are brought together in a way that is useful for the methodology of this research, in which the researcher seeks to build a rich description of experience and an interpretative perspective on that experience. Van Manen eases the contradiction further: “The implied contradiction may be resolved if one acknowledges that the (phenomenological) facts of lived experience are already meaningfully (hermeneutically) experienced.” (1990, p.181).

Hans-Georg Gadamer, whose work was introduced in Chapter 3, offers significant implications for research methods based on the approach of hermeneutic phenomenology. His suspicion of the use of method in narrowing the focus of the researcher’s interest prompts the researcher to be alert to her own historical situatedness and how this influences both the research actualisation and the results. Nevertheless, Gadamer insisted that the researcher’s own understandings cannot be bracketed off, but are a vital research tool. Particularly exciting to me is Gadamer’s description of the dialectic of experience which may be part of the research process, “The dialectic of experience has the proper fulfilment not in definite knowledge but in the openness to experience that is made possible by experience itself.” (1981, p.335). In qualitative research of a hermeneutic phenomenological nature, negativity, or the

thwarting of expectation, acts as both an inspiration to access new knowledge and a safeguard against understanding repetition to mean anything other than just that, repetition. I enjoyed this idea. It released me to look forward to a research process by which each time a new insight was gained it was akin to a stepping onto a new threshold of meaning. I might never know when it would come, and often might doubt that, this time, it would. The research process itself might yield moments very like R.S. Thomas' experience of truth perception or personal revelation described in "Suddenly" (1975):

As I had always known
he would come, unannounced,
remarkable merely for the absence
of clamour. So truth must appear
to the thinker; so, at a stage
of the experiment, the answer
must quietly emerge.

Consideration three

Thirdly, my research began with the observation that gay and lesbian voices are frequently silenced in the life of the Church. Qualitative research methods offer the participant the opportunity to voice their own story in detail and depth. I aimed, by the process of interview to be described in detail in Chapter 7, to create stakeholders in a dialogue rather than produce a set of cumulative generalisations in keeping with the socio-politically committed nature of practical theology (Woodward and Pattison, 2000, p.14).

Initially, I considered three main methods of increasing participation by the stakeholders in this research. First, the nature and purpose of the research would be explained in a letter. Second, this would be followed up by a one-to-one or telephone conversation to clarify aims and processes, particularly the processes surrounding confidentiality. In that conversation discussion and information was shared around issues of consent including the paths to withdraw from the research. At that stage, choices would be offered about the venue and timing of the proposed interviews, about receiving questions in advance, and about choosing another mode of information gathering should an interview not be appropriate. Third, at the point of transcript completion, the participant is given the opportunity to edit the text to their own satisfaction and that is checked by the researcher until the participant is happy with the result. Involved in this checking process each participant is asked to choose an alternative name to anonymise their contribution.

However, towards the end of the period of my data collection, further ideas

emerged concerning participant involvement. There was a seemingly natural longing expressed by participants to understand where the research might lead. Secondly I faced a change of context for my work, with a move to teach Practical Theology. Both these factors indicated the need to draw together the participants who wished to come into a participants' reflection group, to share thoughts and concerns about the process and to form plans for sharing the results of the research in the future.

Consideration four

Fourthly, from a practical point of view, it was becoming increasingly likely that interviews would become my principal method of data gathering. My work and life as a priest and former social worker possessing pastoral and counselling skills, positioned for work at the centre of communications networks in central London, and in a church context in which confidential interviews are both understood and safely staged, all seemed to fit the methodologies of qualitative research. These require person-to-person meetings, the ability to find participants for study, and safe circumstances in which to meet. There was therefore a satisfying congruence between my research methodology and my life as a practical theologian and priest. "Doing qualitative research is a challenge that brings the whole self into the process." (Corbin and Strauss, 2008, p.13). Qualitative research demands both personal and epistemological reflexivity.

Swinton and Mowat emphasise reflexivity as integral to the very nature of qualitative research. They define it as, "the process of critical self-reflection carried out by the researcher throughout the research process that enables her to monitor and respond to her contribution to the proceedings." (2006, p.59). It is a methodological response to Gadamer's observation that the experience of the researcher cannot be bracketed off from the research process—rather, that knowledge may be creatively used as part of the process. But how is this to be done?

Willig (2001) writes helpfully of personal and epistemological reflexivity. As part of the research process we reflect on personal values, interests, beliefs, themes, which have influenced the research and the ways in which the research may shape and influence us. How are we changed by our own research? Epistemological reflexivity encourages us to assess how the conceptual frameworks, methods, language, goals of our research may have influenced its outcomes. How may this research question be quite differently addressed? A reflexive approach seeks to make explicit the reciprocal relationship between the researcher and the research processes and outcomes.

In terms of finding a methodology congruent with my professional identity, the

weight given to reflexivity within qualitative research inspired me. As a former non-directive counsellor and family therapist, I had learnt to scrutinise my actions and thoughts in great detail, sometimes alone, sometimes under the gaze of a co-worker. Similarly, a close scrutiny of interviews had been part of my clinical pastoral training. Finally, as a preacher, teacher and member of the clergy team in a high-profile church, I was very accustomed to my words being pored over by others. To be able to use the skills of self-observation and critique in my research was a good use of transferable skills.

Consideration five

Fifthly, Silverman encourages researchers to answer the question, do they have a gut feeling about what a good piece of research looks like? (2006, pp.3–33). Here a surprise has arrived in terms of my research methodology, reminiscent of Swinton and Mowat’s mild warning, “Occasionally an unexpected piece of information throws new light on the situation and allows intellectual jumps to be made that enable the researcher’s thinking to move on in unexpected and challenging ways.” (2006, p.30).

As this research began, I responded to the rapid social changes taking place for gay and lesbian people in the UK with an instinctive liking for the description of qualitative research as “bricolage” or “montage”. To be a “*bricoleur-researcher*” is to “work between and within competing and overlapping perspectives and paradigms” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005, p.4). Creating a “montage” seems an appropriate analogy, since the quickly shifting, added layers used in this method of film production to create something new aptly describes the fleeting, transient, sometimes exciting, sometimes confusing nature of gay and lesbian Christians’ present experience in Church and society. I had noticed that work as a “bricoleur” might permit me to take note of paradigm shifts in the meanings ascribed to intimate relationships in a parish church of the early twenty-first century. What I had not bargained for was that literary writers, art and artists would become such a significant dialogue partner for me in assisting my understanding of the many layers of meaning within my own research and in my sitting easily with such a rich and sometimes chaotic picture.

As I wrote this chapter I found myself recovering from a depression caused by the publication of a Pastoral Letter from the Church of England House of Bishops concerning gay marriage (2014). The first same-sex civil marriages would take place in Britain in a few weeks’ time. The doctrine of the Church of England concerning marriage was perceived by the Bishops as profoundly challenged by this secular turn of

events. It is not the place here to study that challenge as it will be outlined carefully elsewhere in this thesis. Rather what I detected was a new reaction within myself which stemmed directly from the way in which the artist Kitaj accompanied me in my understanding of queer theology. The Bishops' statement was very oppressive towards the LGBT community and to gay and lesbian priests in particular, denying the latter the right to marry if they wished to continue to be employed by the Church. The letter was threatening to self-esteem, livelihood and personal self-identification as a priest belonging to the Church of England.

At a local art exhibition of David Hockney prints, I was able to study the making of pictures in layers, which helped me understand meaning conveyed through the multi-method focus of qualitative research. At the same time, particularly in the freedom of those prints by Hockney, which illustrate the work of the gay poet Cavafy, I was able to enter a different thought-world from that of Church and Bishop. It was as if the contemplation of pictures allowed me a necessary intellectual freedom to think and feel for myself in ways sometimes apparently denied to paid functionaries of the institution of the Church.

Conclusion

Having reached a conclusion to pursue qualitative research based on five considerations, it is important to explore approaches to defining and assessing the quality of qualitative research. Qualitative research does not seek to explain the world. Rather, it seeks to describe the world from a number of different points of view, so that, with fresh understanding, new transforming actions may arise. Each experience described by the research reveals a different perspective on the reality that is being studied. Collected together by the researcher, narratives and experiences lead the reader closer and closer to a variety of perspectives on reality. "The meaning and definition of reality is therefore flexible, and open to negotiation depending on circumstances, perception, knowledge, power structures and so forth." (Swinton, 2001, p.97).

Inevitably the question is raised: how useful is such knowledge? Although not generalizable, Swinton and Mowat offer a useful definition of its transferable usefulness. They suggest that the knowledge gained from qualitative research may be understood by the terms identification and resonance (2006, p.47). Resonance with the experience of others in other similar circumstances may invoke a sense of shared identity. I am as different from David Hockney in terms of age, gender, profession, and

regional identity as it is possible to be! Yet I found within myself a resonance with his yearning displayed in his work for sexual and philosophical freedom, which allowed me in my turn to review my identity afresh, even for a few healing moments of laughter and enjoyment.

What is required is accurate description of the experiences of the research participants in the shape of a thick and rich account provided by a multi-method research approach. The methods to be used will be described in the following chapter together with the ethical considerations I considered an important part of this study. Meanwhile, it is important to outline the link between a multi-method approach and the process of validating the research. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) suggest that:

The use of multiple methods, or triangulation, reflects an attempt to secure an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under question. Objective reality can never be captured. We can know a thing only through its representations. Triangulation is not a tool or a strategy of validation, but an alternative to validation...the combination of multiple methodological practices, empirical materials, perspectives and observers in a single study is best understood, then, as a strategy that adds rigour, breadth, complexity, richness and depth to any inquiry. (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005, p.5)

In this chapter I have described my research methodology. The methods springing from this choice of methodology are the subject of the next chapter. There, I shall describe the choice of the semi-structured interview using set questions, spaces for free response, developed thought and games; the creation of transcripts with participant involvement; thematic analysis of the texts; remarks collected from a research journal; and the results of two focus-group discussions. I shall also consider the ethical implications and procedures to be used with these research methods. The reference group of art celebrities will doubtless wander on and off the stage of this research to further my understanding of resonance and identification, and to deepen my acquaintance with collage, montage and bricolage.

I end this chapter with a description by Craig Hartley of David Hockney's picture "An Image of Celia, 1985" (Lloyd, 2014, Plate 85, p.125). This description of a painting method illuminates something of the essence of qualitative research, in which the viewer and the viewed create meaning together.

Hockney ... thinks that the one-point perspective of a photographically perceived reality has narrowed our viewpoints, our conception of the world. One-point perspective, as represented by the photograph, excludes a real sense of time and space because it does not involve the viewer. Even a naturalistic painting is therefore better than a photograph in this respect,

because it has been painted over a period of time by a human being.
(Hartley, 1998, pp.386–388)

Figure 6: Hockney, D., 1985. *An Image of Celia* from *Moving Focus*, 1984–86, London: Tate.



Chapter 7.

Research Methods: Treading Carefully

“I have spread my dreams under your feet;
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams”

From *He wishes for the Cloths of Heaven* by W.B. Yeats

Introduction

In his poem, *He wishes for the Cloths of Heaven*, Yeats portrays the utter vulnerability of a lover offering to the one he loves his dreams. I begin this chapter with these lines since, with the discussion of research methods, I begin the process of describing the use of human encounter to serve the purpose of the researcher. The lines serve to remind me of the enormous responsibility to care sensitively for research participants who, in describing an important event and significant relationship in their life, may reveal their dreams, and the meaning of their love for another. The chapter involves finding a method to evoke rich descriptions of those dreams while learning to tread carefully at each step of choice and implementation of research method.

In this chapter, having chosen a qualitative research methodology most suited to addressing my research question, I now outline the research methods used. The tightly focused research question supports delineation of an appropriate research sample, and suggests suitable methods of research, the means of data recording, data analysis and dissemination, ethical issues for consideration, and a means of understanding and verifying the knowledge arising from the research.

Research Participants: Forming the Sample Group

St. Martin-in-the-Fields is a busy church with a core congregation of approximately 200 people who worship together regularly. Who would constitute the research sample? What criteria did I use to make this decision?

Uwe Flick identifies aspects of research participants' identification which are useful to consider (2007, pp.25–34). They are site selection, formal or flexible group selection, the issue of diversity within the group, and access to the research participants.

The selection of a site for this research was made with the choice of a tightly framed research question. In order for my research to be based in my daily work, and for the people in that work base to benefit from the research process and results, I chose to work with lesbian and gay Christians at St. Martin-in-the-Fields. St. Martin's has a

relatively large percentage of gay and lesbian worshippers and its theology and worship style is recognisably Anglican. These two features create a suitable fit between site and research question.

However, further questions arose from this decision. What effect would my role in that church, as priest and lecturer in inclusion, have on research participants? Would my role ease communication and facilitate consent, or have more negative unintended effects, such as participants feeling they have less freedom to refuse? What specific settings should I choose to use for research conversations? Having decided that the Church of St. Martin-in-the-Fields was the main site of the research process, and the worshipping congregation from which a group might be relatively easily chosen, I decided to leave answers to further questions to emerge slowly in the process itself, preserving these types of issues for reflection in a research journal.

I am a novice researcher in qualitative research. Miles and Huberman (1994, pp. 16–18) suggest a tight research design for such researchers, including the use of formalised sampling by restricting the number of cases to be examined and ensuring a variety of demographic features within the group from the start. I therefore decided to create a simple, tight plan for choosing research participants. Since I, with my clergy colleagues, knew the self-identifying lesbian and gay members of the congregation who attended regularly, and who were in civil partnerships at the point when my research proposal was accepted (June 2012), I decided to ask all of them to become the sample group.

There is no method to check that this represents the totality of people regularly attending St. Martin's who were eligible to be invited to participate. Church of England Electoral Rolls do not identify relationship status, nor are the liturgical celebrations of civil partnership openly noted in church service registers. Given the sensitive nature of this research it was inappropriate to check by questioning either individuals or groups within the congregation about the status of others. I did however use the following measures to check as fully as possible the representative nature of the group. Firstly, my research proposal was advertised in the Church newsletter and discussed in the following four meetings: an open meeting of the parochial church council; the clergy staff meeting; an annual meeting of all self-identified members of St. Martin's; a meeting of an LGBT Anglican lobbying group which meets regularly at the Church. Furthermore, the regular attenders and clergy team are a close-knit group who know each other well so that it is unlikely that I as the identified LGBT clergy staff member did not know the full cohort. A possibility remains however that this was not the case,

so that my sample is accurately described as that group of openly self-identifying lesbian and gay Christians who were regular attenders at St. Martin's at that time.

The participating group was diverse in terms of gender, age, and, to a lesser ethnic origin, as this table suggests.

Table 1: Gender, age and ethnicity of participants

Participant	Age	Gender	Ethnicity
1	20–29	Female	White British
2	30–39	Female	White British
3	30–39	Male	White Other
4	30–39	Male	Asian Other
5	40–49	Female	White British
6	40–49	Female	White British
7	40–49	Female	White British
8	50–59	Male	White British
9	50–59	Male	White Other
10	50–59	Male	White British
11	50–59	Female	White British
12	50–59	Male	White British
13	50–59	Female	White British

The variety of age and gender within the group suggested there would be engagement with a range of life experiences and attitudes. However, I did not intend to make comparative studies, taking these differences into account, given the small size of the group and that this was my first research project in this field.

In terms of exclusion criteria one criterion remained for consideration. This was that participants should not be receiving pastoral care in any intensive or regular form from me. This was important lest issues of pastoral dependency influence responses to research questions. Fortunately, this excluded no-one from the group.

Access to the group was gained first in the form of permission from the Vicar of St. Martin's to pursue this research and to approach research participants. Agreement from the PCC was also gained but not without my learning early possible effects of research where a particular group is selected for special study and attention. A prominent gay member of the congregation who is single bewailed what in his eyes amounted to "yet more attention given to intimate couple relationships in the life of the Church". This observation was valid. To ameliorate this critique, I ensured that support for single people became part of my work of inclusion in adult education at St. Martin's.

Access to the participants themselves was gained firstly by verbal communication, later by an initial letter (Appendix E), followed by a longer letter with a proposed research outline (Appendix F), and a letter of informed consent (Appendix G). This

process was time-consuming since it included telephone and face-to-face conversations to clarify issues and to begin to gain trust.

The Method of Research Participant Engagement

The research investigates meaning in the discourse of research subjects. I considered the use of case study, focus groups and semi-structured interview to explore such discourse.

While case study methods are appropriate to my research, as they focus on a small number of instances in order to study a phenomenon in depth, they are not optimally suitable. An important feature of this method is to study the case or person “in the case’s natural context” (Swanborn, 2010, p.13), to observe and record interaction there. While observing the research participant at home or at work talking about the rite and relationship of civil partnership would possibly prove extremely informative, it would not be suitable to the sensitive nature of the life narrative I intended to research, nor would it be obvious which “life situations” to choose to study, as each would render possible a very different interpretation and presentation of the self.

The focus group offers an attractive alternative method of research with its emphasis on creating a context for “voicing” experience. However, two factors dissuaded me from using this as the primary research method. As Roseline Barbour discusses, candidates are likely to compete in a group to tell their story and this competition may in recording create voices which are indistinguishable from each other (Barbour, 2007, p.18). Secondly, life stories are less likely to unfold sequentially in a group context so that again a confused picture may develop.

A key concept in this research is story-telling in the hermeneutic tradition of pastoral care, so that theological themes in the language of the participants may be investigated. Kvale describes the aim of semi-structured interviews in a way fitting to this research: “A semi-structured life world interview attempts to understand themes of the lived daily world from the subjects’ own perspectives” (Kvale, 2007, p.10).

I was attracted to use this research method for three reasons. Firstly, I was at ease with a method of interaction requiring sensitivity, self-awareness and appropriate distance since I had spent many years of my life as a social worker and counsellor before becoming a priest, and had continued to practice interview skills in pastoral care and spiritual discernment. Secondly, the ambiguous nature of response which may be elicited using this method of interaction is apposite to my research question. As Kvale expresses this, “The contradictions of interviewees need not merely be due to faulty communication in the interview, nor to the interviewee’s personality, but may be

adequate reflections of objective contradictions in the world in which we live.” (p.13). Finally, my hope was that the method might prove a positive experience for the research actors themselves: “A well conducted research interview may be a rare and enriching experience for the subject, who may obtain new insights into his or her life situation” (p.13).

The Content and Shape of the Interview Process

The content and shape of the interviews was determined by three decisions made early in the research journey: firstly, by the themes which emerged in the creation of a conceptual framework; secondly, by the decision to use the self, in dialogue with others, as a research tool; and finally, by the decision to conduct pilot interviews.

The themes of the conceptual framework—hermeneutical practical theology, the language of marriage, and queer theory and theology—created the main headings for the interview schedule (Appendix H). Yet these sections remained sufficiently porous for other meanings to emerge. I arrived at this porous quality of interview design by drawing on my experience as a non-directive counsellor in social work and as an innovative facilitator in adult education. Discussion in research supervision of my accustomed interview and education techniques to elicit personal information resulted in creating a loose interview schema, with suggested direct and indirect questions, as preparation for arranging three pilot interviews. I decided to trial photographs, bible stories and art cards to elicit further layers of response as part of the interview process. The use of these methods in pilot interviews, and suggestions from colleagues following a presentation of these methods at summer school, indicated their usefulness to create a deeper sense of variety, experiment and play around topics which might prove difficult or painful to approach. The interview schedule used for the pilot interviews is attached as Appendix I. Topics were approached from a number of different angles and the attempt made, not always successfully at this stage, to use everyday language. Different sorts of questions were used—introductory, probing, specifying, direct, indirect, structured, and interpretive, with space for silence.

The Pilot Interviews

Three people willing to act as pilot interviewees presented themselves at a United Reform Church where a D.Prof. research colleague was able to act as my host. In addition to the confidence gained in the practice of making and recording interviews, moving from the use of a very tight interview schema of questions (Appendix I) to the looser schema presented at Appendix H, I gained three insights from the pilot studies.

Firstly, I learned what techniques may bring relaxation and fluency of speech to the interviewees and what practices may inhibit relaxation. The use of rooms chosen by the interviewees, that they were committed to help with the process, that I wore non-clerical dress, and was myself relaxed, all appeared to contribute to a sense of calm openness. I discovered that the interviews were a tiring experience for both interviewer and interviewee, so that I settled on an absolute time limit of 90 minutes, with a tailing off of intensity with the use of adult education exercises towards the end of the interview, which worked well to retain the momentum of the interview until the end.

Secondly I learned more of the care needed surrounding the issue of boundaries to interview with ethical integrity. At some points in the pilot interviews, two interviewees indicated that I had almost become “someone else” for them. One said that if a snapshot were taken of our working we might appear like a “married couple preparing Sunday School”, another that I was “easy to talk to, like a best friend”. There was an atmosphere of intense intimacy at times which felt almost sexual in quality, so that I experienced how exploring the subject of intimate relationships led from time to time to projection and transference entering the meeting space. I learned to treat my interviewees gently, particularly closing interviews carefully with clear details of what would happen next, both in terms of their receiving a transcript for their own editing and of my D.Prof. colleague, who was their church minister, being willing to talk over issues raised in the process of interview. I had been astonished by the depth of response reached in the pilot interviews. I had overlooked how experienced I am as an interviewer after a career in therapeutic social work and pastoral ministry. I had fallen into the trap of assuming that research interviewers required other, different skills from those I already possessed.

Thirdly, I learned that I had omitted important evidence in the quest for meaning. Not aiming to analyse the language of the liturgical rites and celebrations which my interviewees had used, I had neglected to ask questions about the occasion of celebrating civil partnership or asked to see the words and readings they had decided to use. At first I rectified this by inviting the interviewee to bring liturgies, service outlines or orders of events with them. But this put too heavy an onus on them to find documents instead of simply turning up. I also saw that the documents offered would be too diverse in content, shape and number to be easily analysed and the research might take an overly linguistic turn, in terms of investigating the meaning of rites and liturgies surrounding civil partnership, instead of the relationships themselves. Having completed the pilot studies, I was clear that I wanted to preserve the atmosphere of their having no

additional effort to make apart from participating in the interview, which was potentially a daunting process for some. However, I would ask them in the interview itself what they remembered of the rites they had used. My first interview questions consequently became questions about “the day itself” as they proved a rich and easy entrance into the later process of probing for meaning.

The Use of Semi-Structured Interviews

By the beginning of the formal interview process, I consequently possessed an interview schedule which was refined in supervision and which drew on what I had learned in the pilot interviews. The interviews continued to end with playful adult education exercises. Photographs of churches were chosen to represent types of building and gathered congregation to signify a breadth of “Church type” based on the typology of ecclesiologist Avery Dulles in *Models of the Church* (1974). Interviewees were asked which visuals had resonance for them in the light of their intimate relationships, and why. Illustrations of significant Biblical stories and themes, five from the Hebrew Scriptures and five from the Christian Scriptures, were used in a similar way. Which stories “spoke to” the interviewees and why? Finally, a variety of paintings on postcards from the National Gallery—some overtly religious in theme, some not—were employed for interviewees to approach the question of what experience of the divine they had or had not known in their relationships. In all cases the pictures were used as a prompt to give further exploration of themes.

The Data Collection

I considered the interview to have four interconnected components: recording; transcription; sending the transcript to the interviewee; and receiving their comments for completion and alteration. This understanding could not alter the reality that “by transcription the direct face-to-face conversation becomes abstracted and fixated into a written form” (Kvale, 2007, p.92). I attempted to increase the reliability of meaning discovery by completing word-for-word transcriptions returned to the interviewee for correction and editing within 14 days of the interview, by continued dialogue with the interviewee, and by sensitive and prompt editing in accordance with their wishes. Interviewees’ comments took longer to return, and there was variation in the length of editing process to be done. I asked participants to check first for accuracy, secondly for the preserving of confidentiality and thirdly for overall contentment with the text given the possible uses of the text in future, which might include presentation in their own home church and publication to wider audiences. Editing was a brief process for some

who were less interested in confidentiality and more keen to have their particular voices identified and heard. Editing took longer for others who needed to remain unidentifiable and to reconsider sections of the transcript where they were not content with the form or content of what they had said. Given the sensitivity of the material, and my desire that the research be owned and used by the congregation, including the interviewees themselves, I revised freely in accordance with participants' wishes.

Data Analysis

The decision over which method of data analysis to use rested on three choices already made. Firstly, the nature of the research question indicated a method which honours and preserves the meaning-making structures of the texts created as transcripts. Secondly, the context of the research, which is a noisy clamour of debate about the ethics of homosexual relationships, suggested the usefulness of a method which permits themes from the stories of the participants themselves to emerge. Thirdly, the interest of the researcher in the breakthrough from silence to public acknowledgement of long-term committed gay and lesbian relationships, required a method which permits the sifting and comparison of secular and religious narratives about relationships.

There are many methods of qualitative analysis of interview data. A literature search identified four main approaches: discourse analysis; interpretative phenomenological analysis; narrative analysis; and thematic analysis.

A discourse may be described as “a particular theme in the text, especially those that relate to identities” (Fulcher, 2010, p.6). The discourse analyst attempts to identify categories, themes, ideas, views, roles within conversations to search out commonly shared patterns of talking that reveal the underlying social structures assumed and demonstrated in the text. Questions arising from discourse analysis of the data in this research might be, “How do the research participants use their discourse to construct their own identity?” and, “How have the interviewees constructed the meaning of civil partnership?” While these questions are pertinent to the aims of this research, I wanted to avoid an entire focus of my data analysis becoming speculation about how the talk itself is constructed. I was interested in the communication of meaning, rather than in the social consequences of the different discursive presentations of civil partnership. Nevertheless, the emphasis in discourse analysis—that the self, and attitudes of the self, are inter-relationally constituted—is borne in mind in this research.

Moving on, interpretative phenomenological analysis demonstrates a complex understanding of experience as “a lived process, an unfurling of perspectives and

meanings, which are unique to the person's embodied and situated relationships to the world." (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p.21). It is interpretative in that it takes as its focus research participants' attempts to create meanings, both out of their activities and out of the events which happen to them. Inasmuch as it is concerned with the particular, in great detail, and with rich depth of analysis, it is ideographic. One of the strengths of this method is that, following Heidegger, it not only assumes that the researcher brings preconceptions to textual understandings but even sees this as a potentially positive element in the research process (Heidegger, 1927, p.195).

Despite the strengths of this analytic method, it held some weaknesses with respect to my choice of method. A very small sample size is recommended (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p.51). While the group of lesbian and gay Christians who attend St. Martin-in-the-Fields and who are in civil partnership is small (13 people) the impact of the project's worth within the congregation and wider church will be experienced more fully if the whole group is interviewed. Then, frequent and detailed supervision is recommended since the layers of experience examined are very dense (p.55). This frequency and depth of supervision was not available to the researcher. Finally, despite ventures into other disciplines, this remains primarily an approach to psychological research. It is primarily a tool which would help answer the question, "How do people who are in civil partnership make psychological sense of their experience?" My research was differently focused towards the discovery of theological meaning, the mining of values, and therefore I decided that it required another approach to analysis. However, the emphasis on the dynamic relationship between researcher and the material generated remained highly relevant.

To explore further, narrative analysis is pertinent to this study's purpose since it encompasses the search for meaning in language on at least three levels: structural, interpersonal and ideational. Faced with a story, the narrative analyst asks how the story is put together, what linguistic and cultural resources it draws on, and how it persuades a listener of authenticity (Riessman, 1993, p.18). As a method, it emphasises resistance to searching only for the content of language by giving equal weight to its structure and interpersonal dynamic force. Furthermore, Riessman suggests that it is a particularly useful method of data analysis where participants may create narratives to give coherence where they have experienced not only normal disorder in the rush of life but also a clear gap in the story. "Respondents narrativize [*sic*] particular experiences in their lives, often where there has been a breach between ideal and real, between self and society" (p.19). This research is precisely the examination of such a breach. What

narratives do churchgoing Christians use to explain opting for the status of civil partnership for their relationships, in the face of clear disapproval from sections of the religious institution to which they belong? Clearly, methods of narrative analysis appeared useful.

While I wished to exploit the strengths present in narrative analysis, I considered it unsuitable to be my main analytic method for ethical reasons. In narrative analysis, the person is the unit of analysis, so that their narrative is not fragmented but kept whole as far as possible. Looking into these interviewees' personal accounts to find overarching narratives may over-identify them, and expose them to unexpected and unwanted individual scrutiny. I needed to discover a method of analysis which would identify themes across narratives.

I therefore chose thematic analysis as a method of data analysis, which was first named and developed in the 1970s by the physicist and historian of science Gerald Holton (Merton, 1975). In 2006 Braun and Clarke underlined the distinctiveness of this method by establishing a clear and rigorous set of procedures which could be used for such research across the social sciences. Since then, thematic analysis has become an accepted and widely studied method of qualitative research (see, for example, Howitt, 2010; Whittaker, 2009).

But what is thematic analysis and why is it particularly suitable for this research? Firstly, the research question concerns meaning in accounts of life events. A theme, or pattern of words sought in data, captures something significant in relation to the research question. Because the theme is identified by the researcher it also captures something important about the researcher's interpretation of the data. This research was conceptualised as a dialogue between the minds of the interviewees and the mind of the researcher, in a common search for theological meaning in the rite and relationship that is civil partnership.

Following on from this, thematic analysis is a method of identifying themes and organising them minimally which allows the data to be presented in rich and complex detail. The method is theoretically flexible so that data may be used to develop a detailed descriptive account of a phenomenon. Alternatively, themes of the underpinning theoretical ideas may be explored using the same method.

Thirdly, this method permits exploration of themes and patterns across the data set rather than deepening an analysis of individual narratives. This protects the sensitive nature of the material and prevents the easy identification of participants. Fourthly, thematic analysis is a method readily comprehended by the participants who will be

invited to give participant feedback. Lastly, I am a novice researcher and the field of research into the theological meaning of civil partnership is little examined, so that a clear well-structured method that was able to guide me sufficiently in first drawing out broad themes from the material seemed appropriate, especially given the volume and diversity of the data to be collected.

Braun and Clarke usefully list the potential risks involved in using thematic analysis (2013, p.180). Firstly, thematic analysis may produce realist descriptions of the participants' own accounts rather than an interpretive analysis of those accounts. At times, I experienced the risk of this tendency, before the strong conceptual framework of my research urged me towards creating my own interpretations of the data. Secondly, thematic analysis may lose the individual's diverse voice, glossing over contradictions within a personal account in emphasising common themes. To minimise the potential for this, I used a detailed and careful mapping of the full data set, to protect the individual's voice as fully as possible, and also sought participant reflection on the completed data analysis to ensure research participants' faithful representation. Finally, it is worth remembering that thematic analysis does not employ the rigorous forms of linguistic study used by some forms of narrative and discourse analysis, so that it cannot make such strong claims about the effects of language on the construction of meaning. But nonetheless, that limitation did not render the identification of broad themes unhelpful at this early stage of research into this field of knowledge, and may generate some interesting hypotheses about further avenues for research opportunities of other sorts.

Ethical Issues

The decision to use interviews as the main method of data collection in this research prompts a discussion of ethical issues. There are complexities involved in "researching private lives and placing accounts in the public arena" (Mauthner, Birch, Jessop and Miller, 2002, p.1). Kvale resists the idea that ethical issues appear only at the interview phases of qualitative research, so usefully lists seven stages of the research process at which they require consideration (2007, p.24). The stages are those of choosing the theoretical landscape (Kvale's "thematizing"), designing, interview, transcription, analysis, verification and reporting. All these stages were considered in my application for ethics approval, which was approved by the Faculty Research Ethics Panel Chair in November 2012, under the terms of Anglia Ruskin University's *Policy and Code of Practice for the Conduct of Research with Human Participants*.

One ethical consideration highlighted by my choice of the theoretical landscape for this research is whether the interviewees, their congregation or belonging, or wider church and society will benefit from an investigation of these stories. Exploration of the gap in knowledge about gay and lesbian views of civil partnership, discussion with the interviewees themselves about their opportunities for theological discussion of these issues, and with congregation leaders, together with the researcher's work situation of teaching and public speaking in the wider church, make a convincing argument for making public the themes in these stories. Indeed, not doing so colludes with the injustice of silencing a minority Christian voice.

The argument that the legalisation of gay marriage invalidates in-depth study of relationships of civil partnership misses the point. Civil partnership legislation acted as a catalyst for statements of hope and intention about the meaning of long-term committed relationships among gay and lesbian people, some of whom are Christian. It is the statements of meaning rather than the catalyst which are examined in this research, with the aim of voicing the embedded theology of a minority sometimes silenced in, and by, powerful sections of the Church.

An important part of the research design was gaining the informed consent of the interviewees and respondents to participate in the study. Letters describing the research design and process, with participant consent forms, are given as Appendices E, F and G. These forms were signed during conversations held before the interviews themselves began, during which questions were asked and information exchanged about the interview process in terms of time, place, length, confidentiality and purpose. At this stage, one interviewee asked to see the full interview question schedule beforehand in order to overcome anxiety by preparation, another asked permission for their baby to be present, and two others requested that instead they reply by email to short written questionnaires closely adapted from the semi-structured interview, but not including the exercises (Appendix J), instead of participating in interviews.

The need for confidentiality was experienced differently by participants. All interviewees agreed to use a pseudonym, chosen personally by them. All agreed to have all other names, including names of locality, deleted from the text. But participants varied in their response, as all could potentially be recognized given the small size of the group worshipping regularly in a well-known church. Some decided to have this identity heavily disguised. Others wanted audiences to know that they understand themselves to be part of a protest against feeling themselves silenced and so were happy with any identification which may occur. In all cases I was careful to clarify how widely

the study may be disseminated by later publication on the one hand and how clearly some identities may be recognised in discussion of the research in the relatively small circle of St. Martin's, on the other. These points were made in original descriptions of the research process and at the points where I asked interviewees to check transcripts for accuracy and confidentiality.

It was important, too, to ascertain what support interviewees might possess to talk over effects of the interviews. In one case, I became concerned about the unexpectedly painful material unearthed in the interview. In this case, I checked one week and one month later whether the interview had left any disturbing effects which were hard to digest and was reassured that the experience had been appropriately processed. In setting up the research process, I had negotiated with clergy colleagues that they were available for post-interview care if necessary, and the research subjects were signposted to this.

Loyalty to oral statements and to issues of confidentiality in writing transcripts was reinforced by interviewees checking and, if necessary, re-checking transcripts for accuracy, confidentiality and overall contentment with the use of their material. Once the analysis of the data was complete it was decided that the findings would be presented to a research participants' reflection group, both to feed back the research results so far and to check for interpretive resonance and dissonance between participant group and researcher. That the report would possibly be published was constantly in my mind, and consequently mentioned throughout all processes of communication with participants in the research from the beginning.

Finally, whether this research is completed and disseminated by the researcher is also an ethical issue. Meeting interviewees' expectations that their stories, their gifts of time and energy, and their relationship of trust in the interviewer should be honoured and used for the wider good is an important goal to hold in the researcher's mind.

Validation and Generalisation of Interview Knowledge

The importance of validation of the material permeates the whole research process, just as do ethical considerations and attention to design. It permeates the process in terms of craftsmanship, communication and transferability of results. What does validation mean in terms of the qualitative analysis of interview data?

Firstly, validity means honesty in the researcher about the influence she has in all decisions and conversations, so that she recognises the importance of gaining feedback from subjects at every stage of their participation. In qualitative research the researcher

is not written out of the account, but instead continually reflects on her influence in the research process, by journaling, by observing and noting reactions in interviewing, and by giving explicit reasons for choices made. In this research, I used checking and clarification of viewpoint during the interviews themselves, feedback from the interviewees after the making of transcripts, journal notes reflecting on the process, and a participants' reflection group to increase opportunities for participants to join in and respond to the research process.

This honesty also involves demonstrating an understanding of the epistemological and theoretical questions about the nature of the phenomena to be investigated. For example, in this research views may change in any one interview, not because the interviewer or interview techniques are unreliable, but because the nature of the reality described, human attachment or sexual orientation, is understood to be nuanced or fluid.

Validity is established too in the reactions of readers and listeners to the research processes and findings. My dialogue with modern art in relation to this research helped me understand this sense of validity. By creating resonances with my own life experience, the painting by R.B. Kitaj, "If Not, Not..." (Figure 2, in Chapter 5), made meaningful connections for me between the events of the twentieth century, the life of minority groups, the inner and outer world of the artist himself, my own life, and the task of this research. So the craftsmanship of research may be validated when the quality of "checking, questioning and theorising the interview finding leads to knowledge claims that are so powerful and convincing in their own right that they...carry the validation process with them, like a strong piece of art" (Kvale, 2007, p.124). While the knowledge gained from the research may not be simply transferable to other contexts, it may be generalisable in terms of creating a sense of "identification" or "resonance" within listeners and readers.

Secondly, validity includes the acceptance of and dialogue with the interpretative analysis of the interviews by interviewees, wider target audience and peer review. Throughout the research process, I continued to check interviews for clarification and transcripts for accuracy with interviewees, presented interim interpretations to the participants for reflection, and for peer review by conference presentation.

Finally, rich, dense, detailed descriptions of the research, including its methods, design and epistemological framework, may invite the repetition of the investigation in another research context.

Conclusion

This chapter began with verses from a poem expressing the vulnerability of love, before a consideration of methods of accessing stories about such vulnerable love, which were used in this research, were described. Whether I have been able, by using these methods, to become a “dream catcher” will be judged in Chapter 8, where research findings are stated and emerging themes explored.

Chapter 8. Research Findings: Identifying Landmarks

If we could get the hang of it entirely
It would take too long;
All we know is the splash of words in passing
And falling twigs of song.

From *Entirely*, by Louis MacNeice

Introduction

In his poem *Entirely*, Louis MacNeice explores the fragmentary nature of human knowing (MacNeice, 1937). He reminds us how difficult it is to discern what we mean when we attempt to describe experience, especially religious experience:

And when we try to eavesdrop on the great
Presences it is rarely
That by a stroke of luck we can appropriate
Even a phrase entirely.
(MacNeice, 1937)

Nevertheless, that is what I try to do in this chapter, while recognising that it cannot be done entirely. Using the qualitative research method of thematic analysis, I attempt to describe what my research participants say is the meaning of their Civil Partnership. This chapter describes the process of thematic analysis and gives an initial overview of findings. Later, in Chapters 9 to 12, specific themes are examined in greater detail and depth. Table 2, on the next page, highlights the stages of the process, which follow closely the guidelines outlined by Braun and Clarke (2013).

Table 2: Overview of the Process of Thematic Analysis

Preliminary Stages	A	Creation of data corpus	Dataset a = data from eleven interviews Dataset b = data from two questionnaires
	B	The interview experience	Eleven face-to-face interviews of 90 minutes (Interview Schedule: Appendix H); two written responses to questionnaire (Questionnaire: Appendix J)
The Process of Data Analysis	1	Familiarisation with data (6 months)	Creation of full verbatim reports Feedback from research participants Revision and finalisation of verbatim reports
	2	Initial double coding of the material (2 months)	Code 1: Shocks, surprises, theology, silences, striking words and themes Code 2: Responses to questions that emerged as interrogations of the texts from the conceptual framework Codes 1 and 2 = Two sets of transcript summaries with researcher's initial reflections
	3	Preliminary identification of themes (2 months)	76 themes collected on index cards (Appendix K) became four over-large and diffuse candidate themes. Mind-mapping clarified the problem and identified six clear candidate themes among the original four.
	4	Review of candidate themes (1 month)	Two themes among the six, "Role of family" and "Uncertainty", became merged within four reconstituted candidate themes at the end of Stage 4: 1. The Effect of Participation in a Public Celebration 2. Underpinning Theology 3. The Nature of the Relationship 4. Consequences of the Research Process
	5	Defining and naming final themes (1 month)	These themes became: 1. Outward and Visible Sign: The Public Affirmation of a Private Reality 2. From Wilderness to Homecoming: Stories of Liberation 3. Enduring Love: Is this Marriage, or Not? 4. The Impact of the Research Process on Researcher, Participants, and the church of St. Martin-in-the-Fields
	6	Exploring the four themes (12 months)	Chapters 9–12 explore the themes that were defined in Stage 5

The Data Corpus

There are two data sets within the data corpus. To create the larger data set I conducted eleven 90-minute interviews. While the word length of transcripts varied, the length of interview remained the same for each participant. I aimed to create a relaxed style of interviewing with adequate space for flexibility within the interview for taking a drink,

wiping tears, viewing a slide, playing with a child, and so on, if necessary, within the 90 minutes. In one instance the interview took substantially less time (75 minutes) as the interviewee possessed a concise and rapid response style. Interestingly, however, this interviewee's word count was longer than that of others who had taken the full 90 minutes to speak.

Two participants chose at the point of receiving participant information, and after further telephone conversations, to instead answer brief questionnaires (Appendix J), based on the interview questions, rather than be interviewed face to face. At first I was disappointed by these reactions but realised that both the nature of their response and their written answers to questions were valuable elements in the research process. I had been particularly concerned that my position as a priest on the staff might either cause participants to feel unable to refuse to take part, or influence participants to seek my views about civil partnership and mimic them, even unconsciously. Here was evidence that this was not the case, that congregation members felt able to decide the shape of their own contribution to this research.

The Interview Experience

There were several reasons for allowing the interviews to take up the same length of time. Firstly, I used a circular style of questioning whereby questions of meaning were approached from different perspectives. For this to be effective, time is needed for reflection, expansion of response and the uninhibited repetition of ideas. Secondly, the pilot interviews had helped me understand how tiring such interviews may become, so that 90 minutes became a maximum length of interview. Thirdly, the adult education exercises used at the end of each interview had a game-like quality, as their success rested on immediate thinking, word association and response to images. Noticing the time, it was possible to shorten or lengthen these exercises. This change in interview style was useful in allowing those who speak quickly to pause for reflection, the bulk of their answers already recorded, and those who are less loquacious to relax and become more verbose, knowing there could be no "right answer" to strive for. Being able to control the length of the interview in this way, having clarified it with each interviewee at the start, gave a sense of calm containment to a process in which both joyful and painful experiences and ideas were considered.

Again, following the pilot interviews, I found that I interviewed best, putting interviewees at their ease to give rich descriptions of their experiences, when I was utterly familiar with the interview schedule (Appendix H). This was structured in seven

sections, preceded by an introduction and followed by a debriefing. The seven questions, to which I adhered firmly—though not always in their original order—concerned a description of civil partnership as a special event in their life; a first approach to what they consider civil partnership means; its likeness to marriage; influences over their decision making; the effect of civil partnership on their faith; their experience of being lesbian or gay more generally; and their views, expressed through completing exercises, about the Bible, Church belonging, and the role of God in their relationship. Subsidiary questions were asked only if it became necessary to prompt a fuller response. From these interviews, verbatim reports were created as described below in Table 3.

Table 3: Word Count of Interviews with Age, Gender and Ethnicity of Research Participants.

Participant	Word Count	Age	Gender	Ethnicity
1	4916	20–29	Female	White British
2	6410	30–39	Female	White British
3	7802	30–39	Male	White Other
4	6022	30–39	Male	Asian Other
5	9111	40–49	Female	White British
6	9050	40–49	Female	White British
7	8401	40–49	Female	White British
8	7060	50–59	Male	White British
9	8635	50–59	Male	White Other
10	629	50–59	Male	White British
11	7909	50–59	Female	White British
12	1163	50–59	Male	White British
13	7629	50–59	Female	White British

In this table I mention the age, ethnicity and gender of participants since it was possible that these factors may determine for them to some degree the meaning of civil partnership. The oldest participants, like myself, were alive before the decriminalisation of homosexuality in the United Kingdom. For the youngest participants, civil partnerships were already commonplace among their peer groups. Similarly, the meaning of civil partnership may vary according to prevalent attitudes to homosexuality in the participants' country of origin. Lastly, as with race and age, I do not use these variables in a detailed way for a comparative analysis of experience. Nevertheless, gender plays a significant role in feminist and queer critiques of Church and of Sexual Theology, so it is important to identify gender difference where it appears to impinge on meanings given to the rite and relationship of civil partnership.

The two shortest documents in the above table, documents 10 and 12, create the second smaller data set within the data corpus. While their individual responses do not

create rich, thick descriptions of civil partnership, thematic analysis is used to analyse themes across data sets so that these responses, while “thinner”, may nevertheless also reflect important themes. I decided therefore to analyse their written answers in exactly the same way as I analysed the longer transcripts, and to create one data set from both types of response.

Stage One: Familiarisation with the data

The six stages identified by Braun and Clarke in the process of thematic analysis are

1. Familiarisation with the data;
2. Initial coding of the material;
3. Preliminary identification of themes;
4. Review of themes;
5. Definition and naming of themes;
6. Writing an account of the themes. (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.35).

Stage One took place over six months during which I audio-recorded each interview. Following the recording I produced a transcript, a verbatim report of the interview, with additional notes inserted into the script about noticeable physical reactions within the participants themselves, such as laughing, yawning, stuttering, sighing or pausing. I also inserted into the scripts my own response where it was experienced particularly strongly, such as when I realised I had asked no main question about a person in civil partnership hoping to raise their own family, or where I noticed a participant’s life experience seemed markedly like my own. I added these comments before the interviewee reviewed the transcript so that they might ask for them to be altered or deleted, and so that I gave a clear sign of the dialogical nature of the process in which findings do not “emerge” but are identified by the researcher as significant. The transcript was sent to the interviewee within 15 days to be checked for accuracy and appropriateness of disclosure by the interviewees themselves, and consequently revised by the researcher and checked once more by the interviewee before a final approved transcript was then produced.

Creating verbatim reports of the interviews in this way was an exacting and tiring process but also very exciting and illuminating in terms of my beginning to understand each participant, and my reactions to their responses. I chose to make full verbatim accounts, trying to reflect the realities described while also unpicking by my own reflections the surface of this “reality”, working in a contextualist manner. I chose to work at first on the entire data set, to maintain a rich overall description, before

providing more detailed and nuanced accounts of a particular group of themes addressing my research question. Participants varied in the amount of time they took over the checking and review process, from a few days to a few months where important details concerning confidentiality needed to be checked and re-checked, or where life events interrupted the research timetable. This process of checking was an important part of validating the research findings but also of working with the interviewee in a relationship of trust. I enjoyed the sense that this research belonged not only to me but to the interviewees. I wanted participants to enjoy and not fear the analysis being discerned.

Stage Two: Initial Double Coding of the Material

A more detailed familiarisation of the texts continued with the initial coding of the material. I devised a method of summarising the material while beginning to comb it rigorously for codes, which Boyatzis defines as “the most basic segment, or element, of the raw data or information that can be assessed in a meaningful way regarding the phenomenon” (1998, p.63). Wanting to identify themes which were data-driven in addition to themes which were theory-driven, I created two new documents from each transcript which I called Coding 1 and Coding 2. To produce Coding 1, I asked these exploratory questions, and colour coded the text where each question was answered:

- What stands out immediately when I read this transcript?
- What stands out when I read it again?
- Is there evidence of theological reflection here?
- What silences do I notice, in pauses, or unanswered questions, or deflections?
- What shocks or surprises me most when I read this transcript?

These questions concerning my immediate impressions represent an effort to allow the analysis to be data-driven rather than to match entirely the theoretical framework which I had set around my research question. Braun and Clarke suggest that unless there is clear discernment of difference between the primary research question, the narrower questions linked to the conceptual framework, and the interview questions, researchers may fall into the trap of making no analysis, since they use their interview questions to identify themes. I wished to avoid this danger, and to code for as many potential themes and contradictions within themes as possible.

In noticing and using reflective silences and gaps, I gave attention to where participants attend to the slow process of exploring what really matters to them. In *Pastoral Supervision* (2010), Leach and Paterson link space creation with the ethical

consideration of the sensitive use of power, and with the theological perspective of granting the Holy Spirit room for manoeuvre.

The more honest and vulnerable a person is encouraged to be, the more powerful will be the intervention we make and the more important it becomes that we are in touch with what the Holy Spirit is doing and with the dimension of our own personalities and experiences that are likely to get in the way. (Leach and Paterson, 2010, p.139)

As I noticed surprises and shocks, I absorbed the impact of hearing strange or unexpected material. I remained the one who identifies such surprises and this identification permits me to find dislocations in the interviewees' stories of their experience, whether within their own stories, or between interviewees' narratives, or between their experience and mine.

When I looked for what stands out in the transcript of an interview, including what may stand out theologically, I began to analyse the dialogue between myself and the research participant. In reflection before the interview began and in immediate research journaling afterwards, I asked myself the question "How may I attend to this conversation in such a way that I may see things differently afterwards?" If nothing stood out in another's story of life and faith, I was merely finding my own story repeated rather than listening to how another may live creatively out of God's call.

In contrast, to produce Coding 2, I returned to my original research question and its conceptual framework to form these questions which I use to address the text of each transcript

- What meaning does the participant give to civil partnership, to their rite of registration and to the underlying relationship?
- Do their replies resonate with the language of marriage, its history, traditions and theology?
- Are there ideas present in this transcript which may be found in Giddens' language of the "pure relationship" and the "transformation of intimacy"?
- Are there traces of queer theory and theology?
- How is the relationship and its implications described theologically?

Having coloured words and sentences in the text which appear to address the above questions, I created Coding 2 for each transcript. Coding 2 consisted of verbatim extracts alongside which I added reflections and comments in italics. I planned to use Coding 1 and Coding 2 as further documents to analyse while returning to the transcripts themselves to explore discovered themes in an iterative way. To discern

meaning in missed material I later returned to examine the uncoloured texts.

Coding 1 and Coding 2 serve as transcript summaries, as verbatim extracts, and as reflections on both sets of questions listed above. The production of Coding 1 and 2 for eleven transcripts and two responses to questionnaires took three months to complete, but constituted a detailed familiarisation process and completed Stages 1 and 2 of the thematic analysis process described by Braun and Clarke.

Stage Three: Preliminary Identification of Themes

The next stage took place over one month. I made an initial identification of 76 themes on to indexed cards, covering 114 A5 cards. To minimise the risk of losing individuality among the participants I made no assumption at this stage that themes should occur frequently or in more than one transcript. Some themes occurred frequently and were widely explored across transcripts, such as the participants' attitude to Church belonging, since they stemmed directly from an interview question. Others were new and less commonly explored, such as uncertainty over the name and nature of church rites offering prayers of thanksgiving for civil partnership. A list of these 76 themes, with the number of times they are mentioned, is given at Appendix K.

I approached the creation of overarching candidate themes from this list of themes in three initial stages. Firstly, I noted the amount of space required by each theme on index cards. I did not assume that themes mentioned in less than one side of card were unimportant, and I retained all of them. Nevertheless, it was useful to indicate the amount of focus given each by the participants. For example, the description of civil partnership as an event and as a relationship required the use of 25 cards, a discussion of the meaning of marriage in relationship to civil partnership eleven cards, the role of church and church minister thirteen cards, the impact of the interview on the researcher nine, family seven, the bible, God, liturgy, the relationship, and queer theology six (each), equality, gender and theology three (each), and some themes less than three.

I then examined each theme to investigate where they might fit or overlap within a larger whole. For example, taboo might be joined with secrecy, violence, homophobia, tensions, and queer theology; the tiny theme of sin might fit with theology, the mention of children with family, and so on.

After making this analysis I concluded that I had discovered four candidate overarching themes to consider further. These were:

1. Civil partnership as a rite is the public affirmation of a private reality.
2. Civil partnership as a relationship is marriage-like in meaning.

3. The rite and the relationship bear witness to a God who refuses to be silent.
4. The effect of the interview process on the researcher and the research interviewees.

However, I felt uneasy about these conclusions, since I was unsure that all the data had been fully interrogated. I sensed that these overarching themes followed too closely the pattern of my interview questions. In order to interrogate the data more thoroughly I returned to processes described by Braun and Clarke as mind-mapping. Even a cursory attempt to mind-map my first subtheme revealed that this was an overarching theme being forced to cover too much data.

Experimenting further with mind-maps I found that the data could be clustered around three overarching candidate themes and one smaller theme.

1. Civil partnership as transformational turning point.
2. The nature of the relationship and its likeness to marriage.
3. The theological underpinning of the relationships.
4. The effect of the interviews on participants and researcher.

I assessed that all the data could be included in these four themes and created a colour-coded list to demonstrate this (Appendix L). To create greater internal coherence and distinctiveness between overarching themes I allocated all the material to one of the four overarching themes, examining where each fitted best (Appendix M), not in order to write about every single theme but to give a coherent direction to each overarching theme without undue overlap.

Moving on, I drew four thematic maps of the overarching themes, with possible themes included, to test which themes would eventually become identifiable as overarching, and whether I was starting to form a coherent story from the data.

Stage Four: The Review of Candidate Themes

To ensure a thorough review of these candidate overarching themes I re-read the entire data set, creating new extracts from each transcript for each candidate theme, and outlining in different colours themes within the overarching themes. At this stage I found three substantial themes which covered almost all the data set. These were

1. Civil partnership as “Transformational Turning Point”.
2. The “Nature of the Relationship and its likeness to Marriage”.
3. “Theological Underpinning of rite and relationship”.

I found, too, three themes requiring examination for their ability to stand alone.

4. The “Impact of the Interview Process” on researcher and participants.

5. Family.

6. Uncertainty.

As I refined the categories, two themes—Family and Uncertainty—became merged with other themes, and lacked strength to stand alone in a coherent way. One smaller theme—the Impact of the Interview Process on the Researcher and the Participants—remained distinct. A new order appeared in the overarching themes since it became clear that the theological beliefs of the participants about their relationships rested on their experience of those relationships (Themes 1 and 2) and led into a discussion of whether these relationships may be described as marriage (Theme 3). I had now identified three overarching themes and their order, and one theme which created a coherent pattern and which appeared to tell an overall story about the data. These significant overarching themes were:

Overarching Theme 1: Changes effected in the life and relationship of the research participant perceived to be caused by celebrating a rite of civil partnership

The themes identified under this subtheme were:

- feelings elicited by the event;
- the change in the legal status of the participants;
- the public recognition of the relationship;
- the consequent validation of the identity and sexual orientation of the participant;
- different attitudes towards adding a church rite;
- the rite and relationship as sacraments.

Overarching Theme 2: Underpinning Theology

A core story was identified with the shape of Exodus or Return from Exile. The themes identified under this subtheme are:

- wilderness experiences;
- search and journey both for the other and for God;
- meeting and homecoming;
- being “alien resident” in church;
- God as Creator of diversity, to be both trusted and feared, alive in Jesus who lives on the margins offering strength to lesbian and gay people and who calls to a new way of life which is lived in the Holy Spirit with celebration and with challenge;
- A strong theme here is Church as problem, resource and sign.

Overarching Theme 3: The nature of the relationship

The main theme is the likeness and dissimilarity of this relationship to marriage. The themes identified under this subtheme were:

- What do the participants say matters to them about their relationship?
- Given that the inner life of the relationship is understood to be marriage, while its public status is understood not to be marriage, what sort of marriage is this?
- Is civil marriage, or a church wedding, desired by these research participants?

Theme 4: The consequences of the research process

This is a smaller but important theme. The third theme described in the bullet points below, like the second, was explored at a participants' reflection meeting held following the writing of the research report. The themes identified under this subtheme are:

- the effect of conducting the interview on the researcher;
- the effect of being interviewed on the interviewees;
- the implications of the data analysis for best practice at St. Martin-in-the-Fields.

Stage 5: Defining and naming themes

The aim of this stage as described by Braun and Clarke is to consider the overarching themes in themselves, particularly asking are they coherent within themselves and distinct from each other? Then, how do the overarching themes relate to each other? Do they cohere to tell a rich story about the data, yet without too much overlap? Finally, while establishing a concise and inviting name for each overarching theme, is it possible to describe the scope and content of each in a few sentences?

This process of refining themes continued at Stage 6, when the interpretative chapters were written. Their outline forms the conclusion of this chapter.

Figure 7: Theme 1 (Outward and Visible Sign: The Public Affirmation of a Private Reality)

Summary of Theme 1: These research participants reported that to engage in the public rite of Civil Partnership, no matter how small the celebratory event itself, gives recognition and validation to lesbian and gay relationships. Grace already experienced by the couple in relationship is made visible by the new status afforded by the rite and this making visible further strengthens the couple's capacity to know and demonstrate love within and without the relationship.

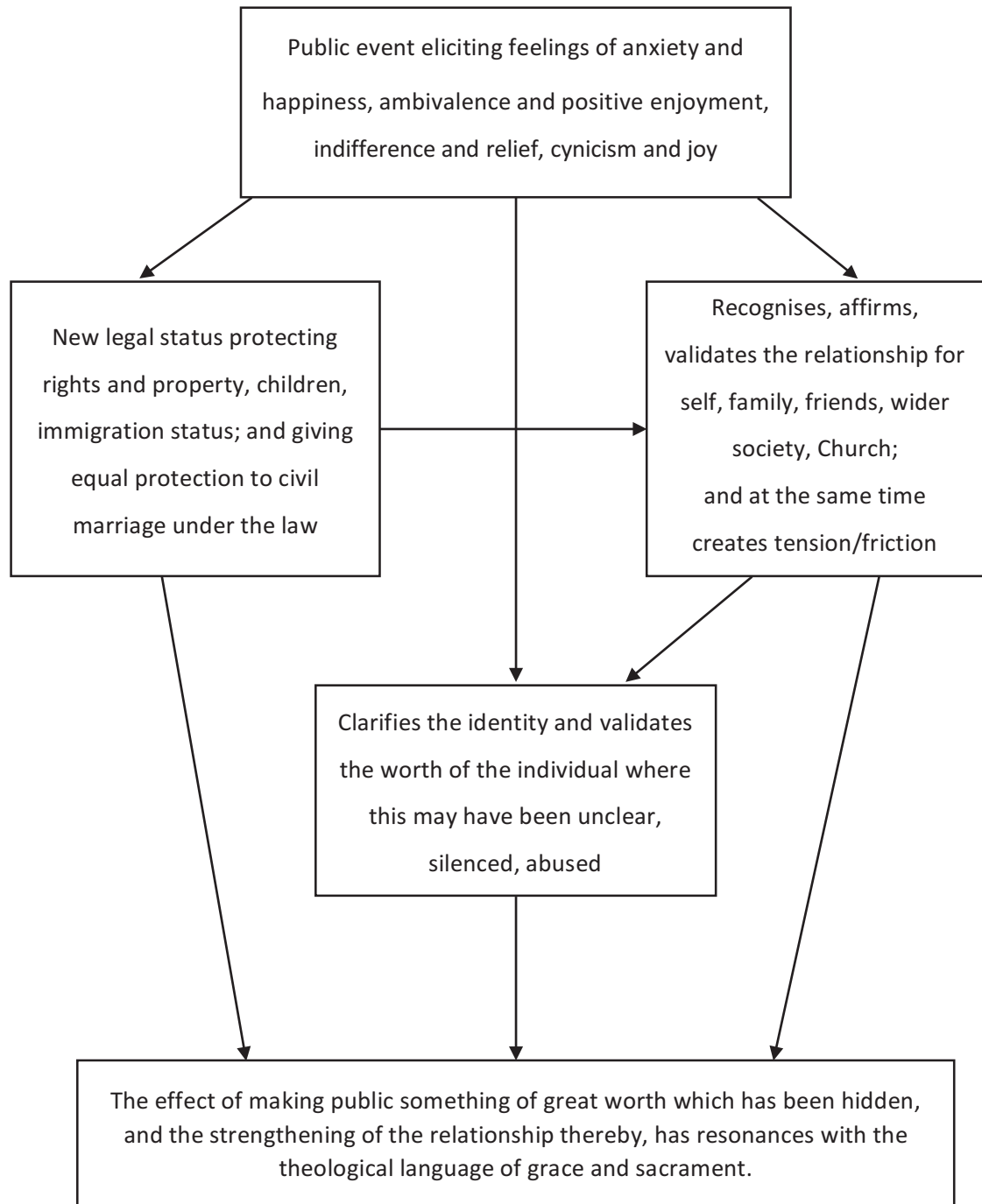


Figure 8: Theme 2 (Wilderness to Homecoming: Stories of Liberation)

Summary of Theme 2: The theological underpinning of the participants' partnerships reflects a core story of moving in their personal experience from wilderness to homecoming. They remain resident aliens in some Church environments but also stay steadfast in their trust of a God of diversity, a Jesus who lives on the margins, and a Spirit who calls to a new way of life.

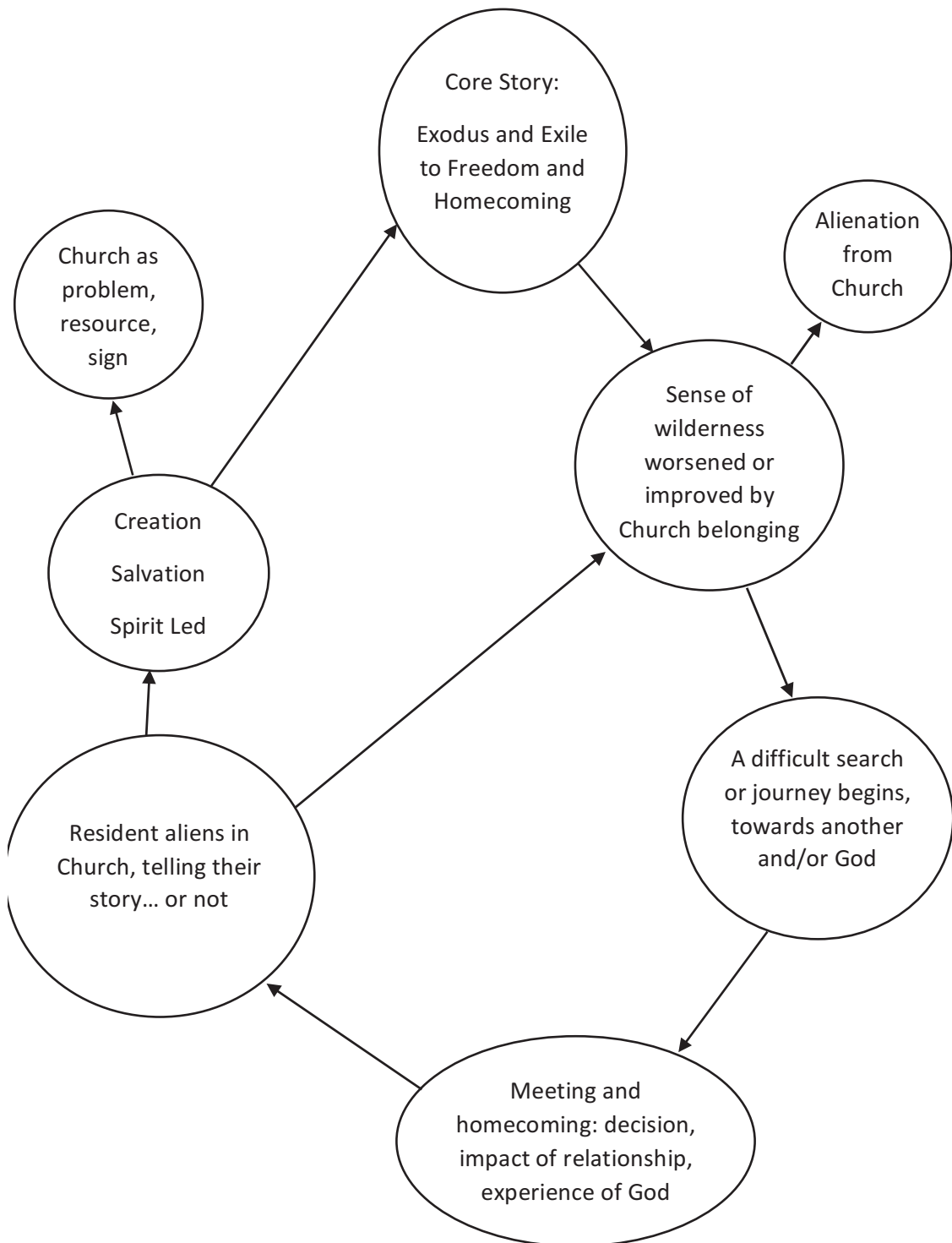


Figure 9: Theme 3 (Enduring Love: Is this Marriage, or not?)

Summary of Theme 3: To the research participants this is marriage in its underlying purpose but not in its legal status. The sort of marriage it constitutes bears certain hallmarks of Giddens “pure relationship” (1992). It also resembles aspects of the marriage theology of the Church of England as expressed in recent official statements. Finally, it resonates with marriage described in Feminist and Queer Theology since it is gender non-conformist and ascribes roles within the relationship not by gender but by skill and gift.

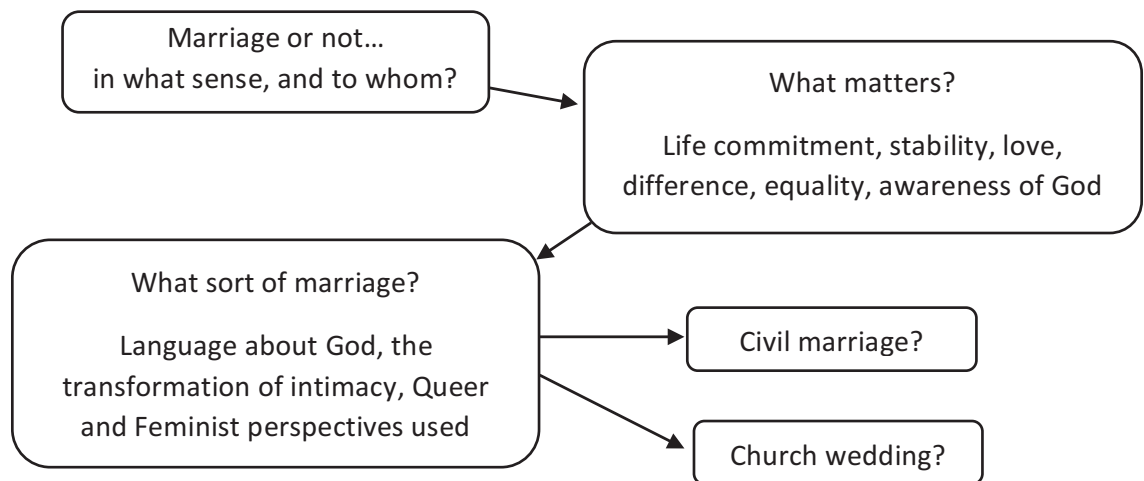
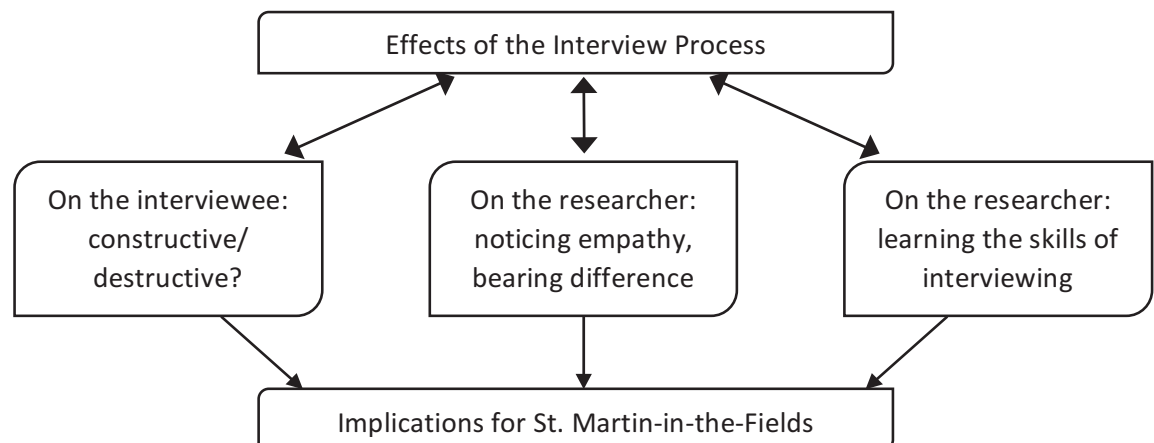


Figure 10: Theme 4 (Effects of the Research Process for Researcher, Participants and St. Martin’s)

Summary of Theme 4: The effects of engaging in the interview process sharpened the skills and the pastoral awareness of the interviewer. Some interviewees demonstrated an awareness of the interview process having the positive effect of understanding anew the story they had told. One interviewee appeared very distressed at one point in the interview. The effects of the interview process and implications of the research form the basis of discussion at a participants’ reflection group



Stage 6: The interpretation of findings

I began my research with the important question of what meanings do gay and lesbian Christians, who are Anglicans attending St. Martin-in-the-Fields, give to their relationships of civil partnership. In the following three chapters I interpret my research data to suggest that participants find, in the rites and relationships of civil partnership, affirmation, liberation and the relational experience of marriage.

In Chapter 9, I explore how, for my research participants, civil partnership means an affirmation of self-in-relationship. This affirmation is effected by both the rite of civil partnership and the everyday life of the relationship. The vast majority of participants (twelve) experience God in this affirmation, and describe both the rite and the relationship in sacramental terms, as visible signs of an invisible divine presence. I interpret this experience to be awareness of the presence of a queer God, seen and heard where the Church of England attempted to silence Him/Her, and civil partnership ceremonies to, in effect, function as “coming-out ceremonies” for God.

In Chapter 10, I explore how for these participants, civil partnership means a liberation of self-in-relationship. All participants experience in the rite or the relationship a political and personal homecoming from a place of lesser freedom and security. Almost all participants (eleven) experience God’s intervention in their personal or political history, setting them free from absence of love for more positive experiences of belonging and responsibility. I interpret this to be the liberating action of a queer God, acting in so-called “secular” movements for justice, helping to disturb and break down the barriers in our perception, whereby we separate secular from sacred history and experience.

In Chapter 11, I further explore how for my research participants, civil partnership means marriage. For most participants (eleven) the rite and relationship of civil partnership constitute marriage in a relational sense, supporting them as a couple to be loving, faithful, fruitful, hospitable and caring for others until death divides them. Most (twelve) know in this relationship God’s blessing and call to holiness as they become more known, open, trusting, risking, forgiven, loved; and consequently less self-centred. I interpret this to be queer marriage, in which hetero-normative assumptions about gender and gender roles, sex and procreation, family and home, and the places and forms of God’s blessing, are challenged and subverted.

In Chapter 13, the conclusion of the thesis, I examine implications and outcomes of this research for myself, for the research participants as a group, for St. Martin-in-the-Fields, and for the wider Church, and consider future steps in the research process.

Part IV:
The Interpretation of the Research Findings

Chapter 9. Outward and Visible Sign: The Public Affirmation of a Private Reality

“But you,” Jesus asked his disciples, “who do you say I am?”
Mark 8:29

*I suppose it's an outward sign of an inward feeling,
which sounds very religious—Sue*

Introduction

In the quotation above from St. Mark's Gospel, the writer portrays Jesus as a person who knows the importance of who others say that we are. We are each other's constructions of ourselves as much as we are our own reformulations of, and reactions to, those constructions. The Gospel writer describes a pivotal moment for Jesus in which the fullness of his identity, reflected back to him by Peter, becomes the context and meaning of his forthcoming death and resurrection. Words used by Peter about Jesus—“You are the Christ”—set Jesus as a historical character in the context of the salvation history of God and the Jewish people. The title speaks of a human figure who points beyond himself to the life of God.

Sue, the research participant whose words are also quoted above, also wishes to understand who others say that she is, and to demonstrate to me the meaning of her civil partnership in terms of her own self-understanding. At first, she acknowledges the simple reality that it is a public expression of loving commitment. Yet, in voicing this, the penny drops that in this exchange between inner and outer worlds, the inner world of her personal feelings and the outer world of community acknowledgement, something “religious” has happened for her. I believe Sue alerts us to the possibility that we can take this human construct of a civil partnership, and similarly see it as pointing beyond itself, albeit in an elusive way, to a divine reality.

The registration of a civil partnership is a public event. Though it is true that the couple concerned simply need to sign a document for the registration to be complete, nevertheless this signing takes place before two registrars, who represent the civil law, and in the presence of two witnesses. Before the signing ceremony takes place, notice of the registration is displayed publicly in the registry office for a minimum period of 28 days so that the couple's freedom to enter a civil partnership may be openly contested or confirmed (Civil Partnership Act 2004, S8(1)).

The participants in this research all differ in the degree to which they understand

the rite itself to have been pivotal for them, and for the people among whom they live, or for wider society. However, they all agree with Sue, that the public statement made about the nature and status of their relationship has been transformative for them in one or more areas of life.

In this chapter, I examine the ways in which participants understand these myriad transformations. I suggest that these findings are particularly significant in the context of lesbian and gay people, who are often living with a strong sense of taboo because of their sexual orientation. I am not claiming that taboos around sex and around sexual orientation were completely destroyed by the legalisation of civil partnerships. However, my findings do show how important a social change this legislation represented, since eight research participants suggest that the corrosive effects of taboo, experienced as an inner lack of self-confidence and an outer secrecy about relationship status, began to be challenged and eroded with this landmark legislation.

I then examine the ways in which, as Sue begins to glimpse in the quotation above, the rite and relationship of civil partnership also appear to have a sacramental quality. I argue that there is indeed a sacramental quality to both the rite and the evolving relationship, and this can be evidenced as participants speak directly of knowing God's love, experiencing Christ's presence, and sensing the life of the Holy Spirit, in both the celebration of commitment and their everyday committed life as couples. Since God, Christ and Spirit are known by these research participants in rites and relationships which have, until very recently, been marginalised in Church and society, I furthermore detect signs in their statements of faith of a queer God, who is Him/Herself excluded from human approbation in the crucified Christ, and whose destabilising Spirit blows where She/He will.

To complete this introduction, Anne's story illustrates well how even a quiet celebration of civil partnership could be given emphatic public significance, and how this external validation was vital to Anne's understanding of the rite's importance.

For many reasons Anne and her partner, unlike other research participants, chose a quiet celebration in the presence of two friends only, followed by a celebratory meal with those same friends, and a gentle rest of the day. She is clear that the principal motivation for the registration was not to afford the couple legal protection of their property and financial future, for these had already been secured in other ways. Nor were the couple insecure in their life-long commitment to each other. Instead she stated, *"We wanted to have some formal recognition of our relationship. We didn't need it for each other, but we wanted to take any opportunity we could for full recognition of it."*

Contrary to appearances she suggests intriguingly that this was, “*very much a public statement even though it was only the four of us*”. Asked how the event was made public she clarified, “*We sent out cards to everybody to tell them that we had undertaken the civil partnership ceremony, so that everybody knew.*”

This narrative demonstrates features in common with other participants’ accounts. The public nature of the event, while important to her, caused her anxiety and pain as well as contentment and pleasure, as it did to the majority of the other interviewees (eight). Not only did she fear that there may be public disapprobation voiced around the event itself—as did other participants (four)—but she was unable, as were some (eight) other research participants, to expect her whole family to attend with unequivocal approval. She was ambivalent about whether the rite made any difference to an already deeply happy and committed relationship, as were others (five). Nevertheless, she was intensely proud that she and her partner were able to make a public statement of intent to maintain a permanent relationship, as were all the interviewees.

I was left with a marked sense of the importance to Anne and her partner of making the relationship recognised in a formal way. But why was its public recognition so significant? My analysis shows that collectively, research participants described four points of transformation in their inner and external worlds which such public recognition instigated. These points of transformation were, firstly, the clarification of relationship status (twelve); secondly, the challenge to the religious and social taboo still surrounding homosexuality (nine); thirdly, enacting justice for others (eight); and lastly, a strengthening of self-identity (four).

Points of Transformation 1: Clarification of the status of the relationship.

The first major point of transformation expressed by many of my interviewees concerned the beneficial effect the civil partnership had in terms of clarifying the nature of their intimate relationship. One participant, David, spoke of his celebration of civil partnerships acting as a hook on which to hang clarifying conversations about the nature and status of his relationship. Significantly, this idea was echoed in every interview. For some, living surrounded by respect and tolerance at work and at home, there was sheer relief at being able to celebrate an intimate relationship—described often as “a blessing”—openly. Tom describes a celebration and party at church in the following way:

I think ‘blowing the roof off’ almost changed from metaphor to reality at St. Martin’s, where I think there was a great sense of relief finally to be able to do this. We were the first to hold a CP celebration there, and we invited all

members of St. Martin's to come, as well as our friends and family. We also then got the Crypt caterers to provide lunch down the central aisle of the church after the service. At this party, we got our mothers to cut the cake. At the later garden party, it was our dads who did the same!

For others, like David, there remained significant conversations to hold in many areas of life. The initial conversation is with the partner, where there is the discovery that the self is desired and desirable. In *The Body's Grace* (1996, pp.60–61) Rowan Williams suggests that such conversations are significant theologically on at least three levels. As we realise that we are another's object of desire and joy we are caught up in the life of the Trinity where God desires us as if we were God, and in the life of the Church whose purpose is to teach us by word and deed that we are so desired by God. As each partner discovers themselves "to be seen in a certain way: as significant, as wanted," (pp. 60-61) they reflect the very way God longs for us and desires us to know ourselves desirable. David's partner describes how this significant conversation took place below an ancient olive tree:

And then that spring of 2011 we were on holiday and under an ancient olive tree he tapped me on the shoulder and said, you know? He didn't quite go down on one knee, but [laughs]... there was a sense of momentum, it was more than a conscious decision.

It was important to David that this ultimate meaning of each to the other was declared publicly: "To me personally it is important because it is the ultimate form of a promise that I could make to my partner and that he could make to me". Significantly, in terms of gay and lesbian Christians creating a framework for sexual ethics, they each remember this personal and public commitment when they are experiencing difficulties, and, by doing so, are recalled to their original resolve.

How gay and lesbian people individuate within and from their family of origin may be difficult, where conversations about sexual orientation are blurred, feared or postponed under threat of strong disapproval where they most need to feel "at home". Lucy is clear that an important meaning of her civil partnership is clarity of relationship status within her family:

What does it mean to me? Mainly the commitment to show to our families and friends... Families and friends matter because we kind of felt that maybe before it's like, 'Do we invite the other half?'

David is grateful that both at home and at work the symbol of civil partnership acted as a clarifying conversation. He had not spoken to his mother about being gay, nor had it been wise to be open at work. The conversation with his mother caused her

delight, while at work his identity with his partner became obvious and prevented further need to have individual conversations—conversations which, in their intimacy, may not always be appropriate in a work setting.

Clearly, not all conversations within families about civil partnership prove easy or welcomed. Five of the eleven interviewees had no parent attending their child's celebration. Nevertheless, family conversations could prove fruitful in strengthening the sense of self, even where such conversations were not welcomed, as Stephen describes:

I specifically travelled to see them a month before the civil partnership and I had one-on-one conversations with my family where I had to go not just one but two steps forward. I had to say to them (a) I am gay, and (b) I am getting married to this man whom you have met. They knew that I lived with him, for all these years. But it was, you know, a big step forward.

Clarification may of course act as a two-edged sword. For some interviewees, the implicit discriminatory nature of the symbolic action caused anger. Some expressed disgruntlement that civil partnership is itself a symbolic “outing” of the gay or lesbian person, that they were not able to move immediately (at that time) to celebrate a civil marriage as a sign of equality with heterosexual people. This discriminatory aspect of civil partnership will be considered further in Chapter 11.

Points of Transformation 2: Challenging Taboo

My interest in this research began with the experience of finding myself rigid with terror when I presented my first conference paper as an “out” lesbian priest. In that presentation, I chose to disagree in public with the official teaching of the Church of England regarding sexual relationships for clergy, which is contained in *Issues in Human Sexuality: A Statement by the House of Bishops*: “In our considered judgement the clergy cannot claim the liberty to enter into sexually active homophile relationships” (Church of England, 1991, p.45). The event at which I spoke was small and friendly, welcoming only a hundred gay and lesbian Christians. It was held in my own home Church, where I held tenure as the Rector. No press reporter was present. Yet I experienced catastrophic feelings about losing my job, being ridiculed, attracting punishment in some way. Seeking to understand this overwhelming sense of terror I read the work of Marilyn McCord Adams (1996) and of James Alison (2001, 2003, 2006, 2010), as I reflected in Chapters 1 and 2. Their work introduced me to the concept of taboo surrounding both sexual behaviour in general and, particularly, sexual identities deemed disruptive by society or church.

In her work considering the apparent lack of justice towards gays and lesbians in

the Church, Adams (1996) begins with the concept of “taboo” as explored by the anthropologist Mary Douglas. In her book *Purity and Danger* (Douglas, 1966), Douglas suggests that words like “purity” and defilement” act as social metaphors. They are used to build evaluative systems which protect social definitions and boundaries. Douglas’ hypothesis was that societies under threat tend to develop elaborate rules surrounding purity and pollution. Because sexual behaviour is so charged with energy and lies at the heart of self-and-other definition, and because sexual relationships will carry the family, tribe and race into a strong or weak future, it is an easy target for the strongest of these rules—the rule of taboo. Taboo gains strength by rendering absolutely unthinkable behaviour which threatens to undermine social foundations, and reinforces its power by being understood to be the will of a family, tribal or national god.

Adams understands the contemporary remaining power of the taboo against homosexual behaviour, despite it being weakened considerably in modern secular society, to lie in three areas. First, there is the threat within a text considered sacred to undermine the mental health and identity formation of the gay or lesbian person, especially if they are isolated by their youth or lack of supportive social contacts. Taboo resists rational thought and excludes an individual not through any willed behaviour of their own but simply because of their very being. Second, the very insistence on the irrational whereby taboos maintain power also permits irrationally cruel and abusive behaviour to be perpetrated against the perceived taboo bearers. Third, while there are marked signs of a decreased institutionalisation of homophobic attitudes and taboos, stubborn resistance to change also persists, with accompanying outbursts of homophobic bullying and violence.

Significantly, in relation to my findings, almost all the research participants (eleven) had experienced fear of breaking a taboo in knowing and expressing themselves as gay or lesbian in the context of belonging to family, school, colleagues or church. Christina describes how unthinkable it would be to family and church to declare herself lesbian:

Homosexuality was utterly taboo, in the sense at any rate of being utterly rendered invisible and unacceptable, um, and not to be acknowledged or talked about. Yes, so, taboo has notions of that and of being unclean and defiling and that was implicit in the culture in which I grew up and sinful...I think all that was very strong.

Sue describes turning away from training in a church-affiliated institution after hearing church members make offensive descriptions of gay and lesbian people: “Some

of the things people said were hideous, not Christian, horrible and hateful, and I thought, I can't do this."

Stephen indicates how being silent about gay identity within the family caused him distressing anxiety:

The relationship with my family has always been a problem. The two-faced nature of it as well, because my family and parents live in another country and I would always travel twice a year to see them and at that point I would have to be their straight son...that sort of sense of two-faced existence really bothered me. I had nightmares for several years actually, really awful nightmares. So this all went away when I sort of opened myself to them.

The theologian James Alison, resonating with Douglas' analysis, understands how this sense of terror fuelled the silence of his boyhood as a gay child. He writes movingly of this self-alienation: "Sheer panic engulfed me... My awareness, as a nine-year-old, that I was completely lost and alone in a dangerous and hostile world, in which the thing that I most wanted—the love of another boy and to be with him forever—was not only impossible but utterly reprobate and an abomination." (2010, p.188).

Alison investigated further the power and importance of taboo in holding threatened cultures together and in banishing or destroying victims who are under its ban. What is particularly significant in his work for practical theology is both that he understands the overturning of taboo to be part of the essential Christ event, and he that he considers himself to be writing from "within the story" (pp.186–208). He is a gay theologian who writes for all people who find themselves in a place of annihilating taboo (pp.230–249). His mentor is the French ethnologist René Girard and it is impossible to understand Alison without comprehending what Girard himself wrote about taboo, the scapegoat mechanism and the Christ figure of the Gospels.

In the views of both Girard and Alison, Jesus attempted to convert Israel away from a social and religious ethic, which rested on taboo and the punishment of the scapegoat, and instead orient Israel towards a love ethic. When he fails in this task of persuasion he offers himself as an innocent victim to stem the violence this has caused and to help his followers see through the lie behind the device—namely, it is innocent victims who are killed when this mechanism is used to create social and political harmony. Peter the Apostle demonstrates his understanding of what Jesus has done in his interpretation of his dream about clean and unclean foods in Acts 10. Here, Alison suggests, a "post-taboo religion" is formed, for those with eyes to see. Peter has understood that, not only are no foods under taboo, but there is no longer a group of people standing against another group in a superior position with God. No people by

virtue of their birth or their behaviour are unclean or outside or inferior. From now on certain strands of Christian thinking will continue to use taboo to exclude whoever is perceived to be the next necessary victim, while other strands will work for liberation and the demolition of taboos. Girard and Alison both believe that the Church is likely to perpetuate the scapegoat mechanism, victimising people under taboo, because it likes to set up clear categories of good and bad human behaviour and to identify clear “enemies”. But at the same time other groups within it, and increasingly in secular society, will understand the moral imperative to stand beside victims of human persecution in all its forms.

As Girard suggested of this, and every other cultural upheaval, people outside the power of conservative religious institutions step freely into places of taboo and show them to be utterly survivable (Girard, 2001). They therefore begin to destabilise the taboo. My research interviewee, Christina, described this destabilisation process in her own life and the role of civil partnership in this ongoing process. She spoke of her first important loving, sexual encounter which broke through this sense of taboo as, “*an explosion of recognition, which burst through that blanket covering which I think I had thrown over that unacceptable set of longings and desires. Feeling both ecstatic and self-doubting at the same time.*”

Gradually over the years, as another relationship flowered, the inner sense of self-doubt disappeared. Yet Christina added that an important meaning for her in the rite of civil partnership was, nevertheless, “validation”: “*What changed with the civil partnership was not so much my internal position as my sense of a more public, civic, social foundation.*” Christina and her partner held a large, joyous celebration of civil partnership, with a hundred people including many generations of family members attending both registration and the following party. She is articulate both about the happiness she felt and the reasons why.

I felt extremely happy throughout the process... Confirmation of value is probably what I think I mean by validation. So the self-doubt and fear in the very earliest stages meant that I was not a person of value and, at the very first, in some fundamental way sinful, because that was my very first experience of my question about what this meant. And that probably planted a seed about my own self-worth as a full human being which certainly changed over time and diminished but I experienced the civil partnership and its public setting with friends and family and the wider society and the legal system which is our civil society as recognition and confirmation of the value of myself in the context of this relationship.

But Christina is also clear that homophobic attitudes have not been completely

overcome:

I suppose the most obvious difficulty was the whole question of how open or secretive to be in the vast range of circumstances in which one found oneself. That's not completely gone even to this day because you can never be completely confident that you will be accepted, whether in this country and certainly sometimes abroad.

To conclude, it is in this context of living under a taboo that the external validation of long-term committed same-sex relationships in public rites of civil partnership becomes particularly significant. It is the constant hinterland of taboo that generates the need for public validation represented by a civil partnership.

Points of Transformation 3: Effecting Justice.

All the interviewees also understood civil partnership to bestow important legal rights in terms of equality with civil marriage. Tom understood it as the end of a long struggle for equality and does not seek the further step of marriage: *"Civil partnership gave us much appreciated equal legal rights, and outwardly a social recognition long sought for, fought for, and rightly ours."* Christina similarly underlines these practical consequences of expressing loving commitment through civil partnership:

It involves a set of responsibilities of a practical kind, and the sharing of one's resources to support that. And that that is important in the CP providing for the first time a legal framework for that, and legal protections for it.

David places his civil partnership celebration in the light of the struggle for equality and of changing both the image and the reality of living in a gay relationship:

It's commonly thought, and it's maybe right, that statistically gay relationships don't last as long and aren't as stable as heterosexual ones. Now I don't know if that's true but if it is true then I am sure that one of the reasons for that is that gay relationships have not traditionally enjoyed the level of support given to straight couples. And I feel that the CP is just one way of redressing that inequality.

My findings show that eleven participants state that seeking justice for gay and lesbian people is a strong motivation for taking this step. Anne understands herself to have joined in the slow steps towards progress:

And we wanted to have some formal recognition of our relationship. We didn't need it for each other, but we wanted to take any opportunity we could for full recognition of it. So when Ken Livingstone did the London thing, when he registered partnerships, we went and did that. And that was just the two of us at the top of the Gherkin building. So we did that, and then as soon as Civil Partnerships became available, we thought that we would

do that too.

Points of Transformation 4: The Strengthening of Self-Identity

How do gay and lesbian people publicly communicate their identity and declare the significance of their intimate relationships? When I first recognised my own sexual orientation in the early 1980s, safe places for lesbian self-expression were few. I recognised Anne's anger over being considered simply "single", as within my own family I was too, while I was actually dealing with difficult relationship issues. Anne states, *"I still get members of my family, you know, sending me Christmas cards addressed to me as Miss. I wasn't even a Miss before!"* I also recognised David's insight into learning to wear a mask at work where being openly gay or lesbian may attract disapproval or, worse, discriminatory practice. As David explained: *"...as time goes on assumptions may be made, you start revealing less than you should about your life"*. Working as a Church of England parish deaconess as I struggled to "come out", so I know well the guarded steps Christina describes:

Careful steps and decisions, discomfort sometimes, and alienation at other times, and being grateful when there was no need to be secretive, and increasingly becoming tired of it, of all those constraints.

The public nature of civil partnership is described by the interview participants as particularly helpful in this context of overcoming secrecy, confusion and self-doubt. For Vanessa, this strengthened sense of self arrived with the declaration of vows which had a profoundly healing effect for her:

It wasn't until the ceremony that those words, that commitment out loud and, I don't know, I have never really spoken words that have meant or come alive so much! And I don't know it just affirmed our relationship and I was like 'Yes, I am doing this wholeheartedly!' ... I thought I was a person incapable of being loved by another person and Alice would soon realise I was a mistake. The ceremony changed that. It made me realise that Alice loved me unconditionally, for all my good and bad. It was the most beautiful and grounding experience.

Stephen describes this pivotal point in his personal narrative as "spine-tingling" and:

Almost like a closure of the previous chapter of my life which was much more, um, a sort of chapter of uncertainty, the sense of the wilderness, in some sense... I struggled with a lot of issues which had to do with acceptance.

But not all participants describe the action of performing the civil partnership rite itself as equally affirming of personal identity. Emma found the conveyor-belt aspect of

the registry office rite, *“a bit like a cremation: as we were waiting to go in there was another happy couple coming out, as we were coming out there was another waiting to go in... just very quick.”* Lucy similarly describes it to have a less self- authenticating effect, *“the actual CP, was so, so secular, so kind of ‘You are not allowed anything remotely religious’ ... it’s just a stage, and a bit of paper, even if that sounds a bit harsh.”*

Yet for Emma and for Lucy, as for all the research participants, other aspects of arriving at a point of public recognition were described in transformative terms, whether as a clarification of relationship status, or a challenge to taboo, or as an act of justice.

Civil Partnership: An Act of Faith?

When asked to provide an image of her relationship of civil partnership, Sue calls it a *“God-send,”* a *“central pillar of [her] life.”* Later, however, she admits to feeling religious doubt about the morality of her decision-making: *“There’s a slight niggle at the back of my mind. What if I am wrong? And God’s really annoyed?”* This tension is described by Lisa Cahill (1996) as the result of divergent perspectives on moral issues offered by the four resources traditionally used as sources of Christian ethics: Bible, tradition, reason and experience. I was interested to explore how my research participants used these four sources to make the decision to enter a civil partnership. Did these resources help them form an idea of what is “good” for their relationships? With regard to each of these categories I attend both to ideas which gave impetus to registration as civil partners and to ideas which created a moral framework around both the rite and the relationship.

The Use of the Bible

In terms of the use of the Bible there are two strands of thought which supported the impulse to enter a civil partnership. The first, described by Lucy, concerns the use of biblical theology and imagery to support “coming out”, particularly to self. Lucy, like many other participants (eight), decided that she had been created gay by God, and so could accept and forgive herself for this, after a period of *“trying not to be”*. She understands herself to have been found by God, like the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32) and, being found, is able to be both gay and faithful to God.

A second impulse to enter a civil partnership was linked with the biblical theme of God’s harvest and Eucharistic abundance. Christina used these lines from U. A. Fanthorpe’s poem *7301* (1987, p.33) in her civil partnership celebration, to hint at this sense of shared abundance:

I hold them crammed in my arms, colossal crops
Of shining tomorrows that may never happen,
But may they!
(Fanthorpe, 1987, p.33)

The abundance is to be shared as witness to others of possibilities for their lives. David, referring to Matthew 5:15, understood the religious celebration of the rite as “*not hiding our light under a bushel basket*”.

There was also strong evidence of biblical theology creating a framework of meaning for the relationship itself. Seven participants emphasise the vital importance of living forgiveness in their relationship; four participants sensed guidance by the Holy Spirit, while another’s image of his relationship as a “*rare and beautiful bird*” resonates with this theme in Genesis 1:2 where the Spirit hovers or broods over the waters like a bird. Six participants understand themselves called to a new and uncertain way of life, as were the disciples by Jesus, and to have entered a covenant relationship of promise with their partner and with God. So strong are the themes of call, journey and covenant that they deserve further attention in Chapters 10 and 11.

What is particularly striking is affectionate mention among most of the participants (nine) for the stories of Ruth and Naomi (Ruth 1:16). These figures act as models of loyalty, faithfulness in journey, bonding outside the expected norms of behaviour and willingness to journey into the unknown, entering each other’s “strange” family. Anne gives a lesbian interpretation of the term “family”:

‘Your people shall be my people,’ you know the whole thing about that feels to me like the inclusion of being part of a community of lesbians, if you like. I get a lot of strength from being with other couples who are lesbians too, because you just relax and be ourselves. It’s never quite that way with straight couples.

In summary, the Bible offered support for understanding “the good” of both the rite and the relationship of civil partnership to eleven participants. Yet it is important to note that for one participant there is no evidence of it having a supportive role. On the contrary he has rejected it and Christianity, finding spiritual freedom and inspiration, “*not dwelling in the past, or in a fantasy future, and in shedding the chains of an obsession with sin and an all-demanding, never-satisfied ‘God’.*”

Calling on Church Tradition

In Chapters 1 and 2, I describe how seeking the good in terms of civil partnership in the tradition of the Church might seem at first sight an unpromising path to follow.

However, participants make rich use of the resources of theology and church tradition to

form and support their views. They turn, firstly, to an understanding of the meaning and experience of the love of God. Eight participants suggested that an understanding of the love of God, whether to be enjoyed or to be shared with others, had been a creative impulse in leading them to enter a civil partnership. Both Vanessa and Lucy, the youngest participants, stated that it was understanding this divine love for them which had prepared them to be able to freely love another. Learning about that love of God in the theology and community life of St. Martin's had been immensely helpful to Vanessa:

I was brought up a Catholic and I was told that I couldn't be gay and that I wasn't accepted in the church and I kind of left. I left my faith behind for quite some time. And then I have been going to St. Martin-in-the-Fields for four to five years now and opening up that door again to God it was refreshing because like I said at the beginning I allowed myself to be fully loved by God, every aspect of myself, and also loving back. And that kind of taught me how to do that. And then I could put that in place with Alice. It made me more loving as a person.

Emma and her partner had enjoyed a service of celebration of their relationship, which Emma understood to be a marriage service, very many years before civil partnership became a possibility. For her, her new awareness of the love of God in the community of the local church was a vital impetus towards taking this step:

Taking the step also influenced my faith. The decision to commit came first, or rather the love came first, then came the decision to commit. And then the opportunity to express that in a religious setting came alongside a growing spirituality in me. And so the opportunity to weave my life with my partner's life and God in one big ceremony, um, it cemented me into a church community, where I was really very happy for the next several years.

Secondly, almost all participants (eleven) had drawn on patterns of enduring marriage to shape their own hopes for the future of their relationship. While this theme will be studied more closely in Chapter 11, here it is useful to notice Christina's description of the impetus for civil partnership:

I think that, culturally, commitment and committed relationships belong to where I come from in terms of a certain kind of upbringing and religious context. And this commitment is part of that. Commitment is probably rather deeply imbued in me and could be linked to a strong underpinning, a Christian set of values.

In terms of an ethical framework for the relationship the resources of church tradition also proved to be a rich seam for participants to mine. This tradition will be examined further with regard to a theology of liberation in Chapter 10, where

challenging taboo is itself a theological position, and to the theology of marriage in Chapter 11, where “the good” of monogamy is examined.

Finally, given that this research sample consisted of church congregation members it is unsurprising that church belonging and traditional expressions of faith—friendship with church members (thirteen), prayer (ten), worship (eight), reading theology (seven), bible study (six), reading theology (seven)—all appear as vital elements of church tradition on which participants draw for sustenance in ethical decision making about their partnership. Lillian speaks movingly of the way church friends have helped her and her partner pastorally:

We have had a lot of lovely little reminders from that day, from quite significant people, when we got into difficulties or when we have had, you know, just stress, from life and work and relationships and family—things that put a strain on our relationship.

Conversely, two participants are repelled by the negative critical tone of recurring official Church of England statements about homosexuality, civil partnership, and gay marriage. Both no longer belong to church as members and demonstrate sorrow and rage at the Church’s official teaching. Tom remonstrates:

I think my experience of civil partnership, and celebrating that partly within a church, has only subsequently made me more aware of just how distanced institutionalised ‘faiths’ have become from the realities of human life and progress. It is an abiding shame to me that it is now society challenging the church to catch up, rather than the other way around.

Emma is brought near to tears in the interview by a corresponding sense of exclusion that official church teaching has engendered for her:

I think that I kept on, like a sort of domestic violence thing, I kept giving the Church another chance. You know the sort of thing, there are really nice people in the Church. The churchwarden in X town was a really lovely woman, a good friend, and she was hurt that we didn’t go to church. Sometimes I think I would go to church to please her. But it left me just numb inside.

The love of God, belonging to Church, the example of enduring marriage, and the traditional practices of faith prove a rich wealth of resource for some participants in their journey away from lack of self-worth and into civil partnership (eleven). For two participants, the experience of continued rejection by church members and ministers, and official church statements voicing disapproval of gay and lesbian relationships, have led them to seek nurturing spiritual paths outside the traditions of the Church.

Turning to Reason

The appeal to reason may be understood variously, because reason does not belong with Bible, tradition and experience in the same phenomenological category. I deduce meaning from Bible, tradition and experience, but cannot do so from “reason”. Growing up Anglican, I have been taught, and now choose to understand it to mean discerning ways of understanding God in secular events and all forms of knowledge. This understanding of the appeal to reason prompts me to ask what are the normative stories which persuaded participants that to enter their relationships of civil partnership was a moral “good”? I detected two strong themes in my analysis of the transcripts. The first is a set of assumptions about what constitutes a fulfilling relationship which the sociologist Giddens interprets as part of the “transformation of intimacy” (1992, p.13–16) detectable in the culture of today. The second is an enjoyment of belonging within the history of gay liberation.

Ted, Matthew, Susan, Lillian and Lucy use very different language to describe what helps their relationships flourish. Ted uses the language of co-counselling, a movement in which he shares with his partner:

I think that in practicing commitment to my partner I gain the skill of being able to pay attention, make sacrifices when necessary, remember to be happy, all these things. So through the doing, through the everyday living, and remembering to do it that I'll achieve something that makes me happy ultimately and him too.

Meanwhile, Matthew uses the language of growing in authenticity. Susan uses the language of adopting complementary roles which suit their personalities, both at home and in social interactions. Lillian remarks that convent life has become a pattern for how they talk at home about the equal valuing of each other's gifts and talents. Lucy suspects that her partnership is unusual in the way both she and Sarah focus on the care of their child but says, simply, “*It works for us.*” What these and other participants hold in common is that they all state that they have decided what they consider to be the ingredients for human happiness in relationship, and check from time to time that those ingredients still hold.

The sociologist Anthony Giddens in *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and society in the late modern age* (1991) and *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Stories* (1992) identifies modern cultural influences upon intimate adult relationships. He writes of the emergence in our culture of the idea of the “pure relationship”, where the partners, set free from ties of family and local tradition, decide

for themselves what gives them a sense of intense, communicative interdependence and of self-completion through the difference of the other (1992, pp. 49–64). Stephen describes this “unmoored” meeting and intensity of hope in the other:

I would say that, you know, when I met my partner, randomly at a club as you know, on um the day before New Year’s Eve, we hit it off straight away. And we were very into each other from the beginning and saw each other on a daily basis and there was that sort of great enthusiasm and the anxiety... you were excited about what was happening in your life and you had this gut feeling that ‘this is it’. Somehow this relationship that you have been waiting for has now materialised.

Lillian too describes this “this-is-it” sense:

I think that for me (and obviously, it might be different for my partner) it’s about when you go out with somebody a few times and you think, oh, well, you get an overwhelming sense that, oh, I don’t need to go out with anybody else!

Lillian is clear that equality of power is an important part of mutuality, and that is not always easy to achieve:

Well, we’ve done quite a lot of these courses and retreats and things where you look at Myers Briggs and the Enneagram. One of the things that was really, really significant that in the Enneagram my partner is an Eight, a Boss type! And I am a Two which is a Helper type. Twos and Eights are very often together. [Balancing power is] one of the things which is really difficult for us in nearly twenty years...

As Giddens suggests, high degrees of openness and honesty are expected in a successful relationship. Stephen says:

What really brought it to a head, the idea that we would do this commitment of civil partnership, was my partner not acknowledging to third parties in a couple of incidents, somebody at work, that we were a couple, or that he was in a gay relationship because he didn’t want that to come out. And I said, ‘I’m in a different space from you, I’m completely open about this. You have got to deal with this, in the most open and honest way’.

The language of the transformation of intimacy is present here in the degree to which research participants are seeking personal fulfilment in intensity of feelings, the communication of shared values, and democratic decision making. Here, Susan describes this equality in very concrete terms:

We just do logical splits—whoever is better at something, because obviously we don’t have the gender thing. I like doing the cooking and the shopping. So I do it. My partner can do it, but she doesn’t particularly enjoy it so why suffer? She doesn’t particularly like doing the washing up or the cleaning but obviously, that’s quid pro quo. We’ve worked all that out. We share a lot

of stuff.

Yet there are two striking differences between Giddens' understanding of intimate relationships and those represented in this research. Giddens suggests that moderns seek self-fulfilment in relationship as a primary good, and that once self-fulfilment in the other is not forthcoming, the relationship is over and the next is sought (1992, p.137). In contrast all the participants interviewed for this research seek life-long intimacy. Such a counter-cultural commitment by all these gay and lesbian couples is significant. Here David states:

And civil partnership... is I think a great thing because it's a sort of steady reminder of the permanence of what we have undertaken. And it's always there, um, irrespective of the trials and tribulations of our relationship

This emphasis on life-long commitment will be considered further in Chapter 11 concerning marriage, but it is a major consideration in what creates a moral good in relationship for all 13 participants.

There is also no space in Giddens description of the pure relationship for Matthew's (and others') vision of decreased self-centredness in relationship and for the moral good of growing in self-giving. Matthew insists:

If I am not transformed by the relationship then I know that this is not a true relationship... transformed in the direction of self-giving... Noticing this transformation is what I hold on to is, if there is a question like 'Are you really in a healthy relationship?' just go to that.

My research findings therefore suggest that the participants are influenced by the changing cultural norms for intimate relationships, which Giddens studies and describes. However they alter, change and discard those norms where they conflict with other influences gained from the Christian tradition, like those of life-long monogamy, faithfulness, and self-giving to partner and the wider world.

Another story participants share is that of enjoying the fruits of gay liberation and increased tolerance towards gay and lesbian people in secular society. The three youngest women have known no discrimination against them in their friendship groups. Emma states, of tolerance towards her as a student in the 1990s, "*I was a student and out so didn't have any issues around that,*" and Lucy describes how quickly the choice to enter a civil partnership became a non-controversial issue, "*Yes. Yes, it hadn't really crossed my mi...I guess it must have done because people that I had known before had been in a CP*". Anne, by contrast, some years older, was aware of taking the slow steps towards legal recognition of her relationship with her partner:

When we got together we very quickly did all the legal stuff so wills, and enduring powers of attorney and all that, we did that anyway. And we wanted to have some formal recognition of our relationship. So when Ken Livingstone did the London thing, when he registered partnerships, we went and did that...and then as soon as civil partnerships became available we thought that we would do that too.

The two youngest male participants had no sense of taking tolerance of sexual orientation and civil partnership for granted, since they had both grown up in less liberal cultures. They show a sense of liberation more in common with Tom, an older participant who summarises the struggle which had taken place, and which was “*long fought for.*” Ted understood himself to be part of the struggle for gay liberation in the Roman Catholic Church of the United States, and to stand on the shoulders of heroes in that movement such as Robert Goss,

When I was 21 or so, I knew Bob Goss—do you know him? Robert Goss? He wrote Jesus Acted Up: A Gay and Lesbian Manifesto—soon after he wrote the book. He is a former Jesuit and he was married religiously, because it wasn't possible civilly, to a Jesuit novice. And he said that he and Frank were a Jesuit community of two.

Using very different language, all eleven British participants suggest how the paths through open, honest relationship and civil partnership are steps to increase justice for gay and lesbian people suffering discrimination.

Trusting Experience

This chapter, about sensing the presence of God, Chapter 10, about a new-found liberation, and Chapter 11, which concerns the trust born of committed love, all record experiences which convinced research participants of the moral and spiritual good of their relationships of civil partnership. Here, therefore, I simply summarise those experiences of love in relationship which appear to have transformed life in a positive direction for the participants. They may be summarised as: joy in belonging (thirteen), increased emotional security (eleven), stability from which to reach out beyond self to others (eleven), awareness of forgiveness (ten), healing from loneliness and alienation (seven). These positive effects of living in a loving relationship will be demonstrated further, but here Susan decides that she glimpses in them signs of the presence of God:

It sounds a bit pretentious but you know a snapshot of the Divine, you know that whole thing about honesty and truth and openness and kindness and love, you know things in Corinthians about what love is, they are all pictures of God, aren't they? So I suppose in that sense—I don't think of it as holy, exactly, but then I don't of any relationship as holy, but it does have elements of, good elements in it which are from God.

The sacramental nature of civil partnership

From the research findings explored in this chapter, I conclude that participants (twelve) see fleeting glimpses of the presence of God in the rite and relationship of their civil partnership. They understand their relationships to both point to and participate in God. In his essay “Is there a Christian Sexual Ethic?” Rowan Williams links this understanding with the theology of the Incarnation: “The Gospel is about a man who made his entire life a sign that speaks of God and who left to his followers the promise that they too could *be* signs of God and *make* signs of God because of him” (1994, p.164). Williams continues in this essay to explore the meaning of Christ as sacrament and of the potentiality for our sexual nature to consequently show “meanings” of God.

Jesus is himself the first and greatest sacrament, and he creates the possibility of things and persons, acts and places being in some way sacramental in the light of what he has done. Now, if my life can communicate the “meanings” of God, this must mean that my sexuality too can be sacramental; it can speak of mercy, faithfulness, transfiguration and hope. (Williams, 1994, p.164)

Participants speak of recognising these qualities in their relationships. In her partner, Vanessa sees Christ wearing a drawn-on moustache for mercy’s sake:

I do see Christ in Alice every day, which makes me smile. There have been times when I have got ill, and Alice has stopped work to look after me. She didn’t know if I was going to get better or not. She kept faith that I was going to get better. I think she felt helpless, like she couldn’t do anything, but, you know, she would still go into the bathroom and draw a moustache on her face. And I would turn around to talk to her and see this moustache on her face and it would make me laugh. Those small things would lighten up the day. Alice does that all the time.

Emma’s life has been transformed by the faithfulness which exists between herself and her partner:

You know, we have been through periods of calm and periods of turbulence of course, but I have ever doubted the... there have been times when we have been separately quite unhappy, but I have never doubted that the relationship would survive. Even when there has been conflict between us that’s like the surface turbulence but the deep stuff is really, I feel very secure.

Matthew does not speak of transfiguration but of “*transformation in the direction of self-giving*”. David speaks of “*showing God’s glory*” known in the shared love between him and his partner. Sue speaks of “*becoming more Christ-like*” because she is securely loved. Vanessa, perhaps most strongly among the participants because she is a painter, hints at the “radiant cloud” or “glory” of God’s presence in the Transfiguration

known in her relationship by her use of the language of “*the sublime*”, “*infinity*”, “*limitless depth*”. She continues to illustrate her descriptions by use of Mark Rothko’s painting No.14 “Light, Earth and Blue” (see illustration in chapter 11) to illustrate her feelings of being overawed by the depth of her relationship:

Because of the blue he uses is best to express that sense of infinity, limitless depth... I think there is a sense of the sublime in this painting and it’s that kind of unknown territory which is kind of scary but exciting at the same time. That’s how I see my relationship with Alice because our love grows every day...

Christina, like eleven others, is clear that her relationship has brought a radical transformation in her understanding of God’s love:

Instead of having a sense of incompleteness and craving in life, um, where my faith would be partly trying to resolve those questions, um, this gives me a much, I suppose really such a profound sense of love that my understanding of the love of God is deeply influenced by it.

When asked what beliefs undergird his relationship of commitment to his partner, Stephen includes the word hope and the comfort based in shared belief in Christ.

Love, mutual respect, self-sacrifice, and also hope. Um, commitment, dedication, and you know I think that that all is derived from [our Christian faith], and I take great comfort from the fact that all these are reciprocated I think, because largely we are, we have a Christian belief system.

Williams suggests that homosexual relationships may be sacramental signs of God’s presence and participate in the “meanings” of God since they reflect and participate in, as heterosexual relationships do, the very desire of God for us. This mutual joy and delight in the other, including the other who is God, is both glimpsed and described in all my interviews. Stephen describes an overwhelming sense of delight in God at a service giving thanks for his civil partnership:

I really felt surrounded by love! I mean that not in a two-dimensional way but in a kind of almost three-dimensional way, like some sort of umbrella, a shield almost, provided by God.

These participants show how in many ways, as McFague suggests in her work on parables and the language of metaphor, “the transcendent comes to ordinary reality and disrupts it” (1975, p.xv). Yet, what is easily overlooked about the ordinary reality described in this research is that it is the reality of lesbian and gay lives. The theology which has sprung from their particular experience is, in my view, queer theology. It resists and interrogates heteronormativity, the notion that heterosexuality is the best way

forwards for all individuals, all societies, all expressions of religious faith. As queer theology, it adds two deeper dimensions of Christian understanding to what I mean by the “sacramental quality” of these rites and relationships. For the Christ of queer theology is both excluded and disruptive. This queer Christ is known both in the pain and longing of these lives, as well as in fulfilment and joy.

Queer theology reminds us that Jesus is a figure of human exclusion. One of the research participants, Matthew, understanding this exclusion, wished to represent the Christ who brings division in this reading from the Gospel of Matthew at his church celebration, yet was prevented from doing so by the priest celebrating the service. “Do not suppose that I had come to bring peace to the earth: it is not peace I have come to bring, but a sword. For I have come to set son against father, daughter against mother, daughter-in-law against mother-in-law; a person’s enemies will be the members of his own household.” (Matthew 10.34–36)

My findings reveal sometimes deeply sorrowful stories amongst participants of feeling excluded by the Church. One participant, Lillian, who worked in a faith school, did not feel she could tell her staff colleagues that in her eyes she had been married during the summer vacation:

I thought, I bet no other straight woman in the world would have got married over the summer and not feel able to tell anyone about it, and say ‘I had a nice summer, thank you.’ I’ve got wedding pictures, in my dress and things, and didn’t say anything.

Seven participants excluded themselves from church attendance for several years over Church attitudes towards homosexuality. One had given up religious faith long before the period of this research began, and one, Emma, has left since. She states:

We moved...and the village church was, the priest there was homophobic and you know in that terribly nice way and, you know, ‘Nothing personal, I just don’t think that...’ Yeah, right. So we didn’t go to church very much...I just put up some shutters, I was terribly hurt.

The presence of narratives of exclusion, completely entangled with stories of celebration, remind us of the God in Christ, who identified himself with the excluded and was himself cast out of the city. Althaus-Reid writes of a “queer sense of holiness” springing from the God known in this excluded Christ: “A Queer sense of holiness goes beyond exclusion, nurtured from the solidarity of a God identified as an excluded among excluded.” (Althaus-Reid, 2004, p.152). If these relationships possess a sacramental quality, the Christ who is known here is precisely that “crucified and risen

victim,” who, James Alison suggests, sets us free to move beyond our own sense of triumphalism in relationship, in order to reach out to other excluded ones. “It is question of moving human desire out of a pattern of relating to others from rivalry, a relationship based on death, to a relationship based on a pacific imitation of Jesus, leading to a relationship with others of gratuity, service.” (Alison, 1993, p.56).

Queer theology also helps us identify another sacramental quality in these narratives, for they are saturated with a sense of God’s disruptive future breaking into time. Christina understands Jesus as a figure who disrupts punitive patterns of human correction and rejection. At this point in her interview with me she has been handed a picture famously called “The Woman Caught in Adultery”, and reacts like this:

Jesus’s careful and effective challenging of those assumptions of the religious authority and replacing that with an expression of love, containment, protection. This resonates with me as that sense that God challenges those ways in which we as human beings enslave each other and entrap each other in rigid patterns of rejection. Um, and that instead God opens that up with love. And that fits for me as an expression of what has happened around the civil partnership.

For almost all participants (eleven) the future life of God has broken in to their life in the form of radical forgiveness, as Sue describes:

This is the first relationship I have ever had in which I don’t have any fear about doing things wrong. That’s not to say that I don’t do anything wrong, I mess up. But I think we bring out the best in each other so I don’t feel so fearful and I don’t get things wrong so much and it’s a kind of cyclical thing.

God has broken in, in beauty and abundance, as David states: “*These are images of human beauty, and are all God given, and again beauty and what is God given are to me at the heart of my relationship.*”

The eschatological nature of such sacramental presence is shown in the ways such relationships point to God’s future of justice for all who know themselves to be oppressed. Ted used his church service of thanksgiving for civil partnership to show “*the Church where God wants the world to be.*” It is shown in an awareness among the participants of that future God acting now to bring His/Her people into communion with each other, and with Him/Herself. The in-breaking, more just, future of God is described in *How Can I Keep from Singing?* (Lowry, 1869), a song which Christina chose for her registration rite,

My life goes on in endless song
Above earth’s lamentations,

I hear the real, though far-off hymn
That hails a new creation.

While though the tempest loudly roars,
I hear the truth, it liveth.
And though the darkness 'round me close,
Songs in the night it giveth.

Conclusion

Althaus-Reid suggests that “God comes out from heterosexual theology when the voices from sexual dissidents speak out to the churches.” (2004, p.176). In my research findings, gay and lesbian Christians speak of their relationships of civil partnership as having a sacramental quality. In these relationships, the desire of God for human beings is reflected in the desire participants feel for their partner, while the mercy, faithfulness, transfiguration and hope of God are experienced in the bodily context of these research participants’ everyday life. I would argue that these justice-seeking, future-orientated queer Christian narratives are resonant not with of a lack of holiness—let alone blasphemy—but with the story of a marginalised, crucified Christ. This Christ allows himself to be outpoured, misunderstood and ridiculed in love, yet whose love is a “God-send”, healing my thirteen research participants’ lives from loneliness, and saving these human lives from alienation for love.

Chapter 10.

Wilderness to Homecoming: Stories of Liberation

“I feel that I have had in my life a sort of persecution [dry laugh] perhaps not quite like the Israelites had with the Egyptians following them, but I have had a sense of persecution in the sense that I was running away from a lot, from my previous life, from my family, from a culture of constraint and prejudice to a life where I could be, where I could feel at home.”—Stephen

“...what salvation looks like is our undergoing a process of divinely initiated transformation, together, in, and as church.”
Alison, 2007, p.55

Introduction

In the above quotation Stephen, a research participant, uses the biblical language of escape from Egypt to express one layer of theological meaning in his civil partnership. In the second quotation James Alison suggests that changes in society such as gay liberation may be understood as signs of the Kingdom of God working in the midst of our humanity. He continues: “The whole wave of changes in society which ‘just happen’ and which are bigger and more powerful than any of us, are not simply entirely evil and corrupt, but are part of what enables us to be brought into being, which is in itself something good.” (Alison, 2007, p.55). The queer liberation theologian Althaus-Reid advises liberation theology to unveil sexual ideologies, as well as political and economic ones, to more fully rediscover the face of God among us. “It is time to rediscover the face of God amongst the Other as sexual dissidents, in the midst of other forms of loving relationships and sexual identities.” (2007, p.132).

In this chapter I identify stories of liberation in the narratives of the research participants. I explore the origin and meaning of queer liberation theology and discern elements of this theology in these stories, including the strategies for change and transformation mentioned by individual participants. I investigate possible reasons why, at the point of interview, the research participants demonstrate no collective understanding of transformative action around the issues contained in this research project. But I conclude that a meeting for participants’ reflections, which was held at St. Martin-in-the-Fields near the end of the process of data interpretation, acted as a space in which to consider the possibility of agreeing first steps in a strategy for transformative action within that specific context.

The Theme of Liberation

My analysis demonstrated that eight participants spoke of liberation in the context of civil partnership using biblical language. Stephen, as demonstrated in the first quotation of this chapter, spoke of a personal exodus from a place of oppression and of civil partnership as a pivotal point of entry into a homeland: *“It [civil partnership] means a sense of security, safety, a sense of completion, um, and a sort of almost like a closure of the previous chapter of my life which was much more, um, a sort of chapter of uncertainty, the sense of the wilderness, in some sense.”*

The theologian Sam Wells, who is the present Vicar of St. Martin-in-the-Fields, writes of the exodus, “In the exodus we see God’s liberating will and power in parting the Red Sea.” (Wells, 2015, p.58). Wells demonstrates how here, and at every stage of Old Testament history, salvation emerges from setback and suffering, as I find occurring in these narratives. Stephen described the presence of God known in his service of thanksgiving for civil partnership: *“It really felt like a celebration of our Christianity, but also a sense of the presence of the Divine, loosely defined.”* Faith in God motivated him and his partner to enter a civil partnership: *“I would say it was probably the number one factor.”* And faith continues to act as a building block for the relationship. *“The sort of seeking guidance, seeking peace, seeking hope again, um, praying together, that is a very important building block of our relationship.”* He is also clear about the liberating role of Church in his own exodus from a place of taboo:

It helps break through the taboo the fact that someone is willing to go along with it, willing to believe that this can be done, and willing to do it for you, willing to put their necks on the block and simply... You know, that is such a great impetus. It was almost like we fell in love all over again—with each other and then with the Church.

Christina, by contrast, links the language of exodus, of being freed from oppression, with being part of a wide secular liberation movement: *“...the Exodus from slavery in Egypt. There is a liberation movement which has been involving gay people in the latter part of the 20th century and the early part of the 21st century in this part of the world...”* She describes the way this movement for liberation has affected her life:

The period during which I have lived knowing myself as lesbian dates from 1981 to 2014—during that period society in the UK has made the most immense changes. Despite some preliminary positive stirrings we then had the Aids crisis, and a lot of negative taboo aspects in relation to that, and then Section 28 and the challenges of that, and then the suggestion that gay people were in some way damaging to families and family life and children. And really through the '90s and especially since 2000 a hugely more positive public narrative about gay people. Civil Partnership represented

both the struggle for equality led by key groups, but also the public shift and recognition. So those changes in society also obviously affected me.

Here in Christina's account there is a breaking down of the barriers between Church and world, sacred and secular history, a destruction of binary thinking which is one insight of queer theology. Stone suggests, "Perhaps the biblical stories that queer readers need to focus upon are not...stories that constitute religious identities in polarised terms or make absolute distinctions between insiders and outsiders." (Stone, 2004, p.132). Rather, "We may need to commit ourselves instead to the task of dissolving those very boundaries between 'inside' and 'outside'." (p.134).

Instead of focusing on a flight from oppressive circumstances David, who describes a far less troubled history of growing up gay than either Stephen or Christina, chooses to understand one meaning of his civil partnership to be a free and grateful taking up of new responsibilities following release from exile. The experience of exile described in the Old Testament is usually interpreted to be a punishment of God's people for disobedience and idolatry, but David focuses on God leading a way home for the exiles to joy coupled with responsibility to rebuild Jerusalem.

I do think that the return from exile story is one which metaphorically matters because it was the story of, um, of both what was offered to those returning, the promise of freedom in God, but also the responsibility that they held to make the most of what was given to them through that return from exile.

David proceeds to suggest that entering into the public act of celebrating civil partnership is for him a transformative action resulting from an experience of liberation and reflecting on a biblical image and text.

That's an important message in the context of civil partnership I think, because, um, you know, we must make what we can of what we've got, we must not hide our light under a bushel basket, and I think that if you feel drawn to somebody in love and you feel that that combination of the two of you in your love can be good not only to yourselves but also as an example to others and can somehow improve things for yourselves and others then that is an example of doing what God has led you to do. And I think the story of returning from exile speaks to me of that.

Yet not all research participants turn to scripture to find a language of liberation. By contrast, four other participants tell stories of liberation using exclusively secular language. Matthew understands the co-counselling practices he and his partner engage in as liberating, as he experiences layers of inauthenticity in his attitudes dropping away. Tom, one of the oldest participants, tells of the long political struggle for

liberation: *“Civil partnership gave us much appreciated equal legal rights, and outwardly a social recognition long sought for, fought for, and rightly ours.”* Lucy, on the other hand, who is the youngest participant, takes the freedom to enter a civil partnership completely for granted. Sue has no understanding of God’s action in history with reference to this issue, despite experiencing her relationship as a “Godsend”: *“So God hasn’t changed but now it’s acceptable for me to be in a lesbian relationship. That’s largely because society has changed to make it more acceptable and to make it legal.”*

Gay and Lesbian Experiences of Wilderness

Participants understand the liberation brought about by their relationships of civil partnership in three broad ways. They speak of escape from a wilderness of alienation within the self (seven), of conflict within their family (eleven), and/or of disapproval within wider society. Strikingly, all eleven interviewees (the two questionnaire respondents were not questioned about this) have also experienced the threat of violence, or actual violence itself (three), with two also reporting accounts of sexual abuse, and six of homophobic bullying. In spiritual terms the majority of participants (nine) also reported having known a sense of separation from God.

Lillian describes the wilderness of alienation caused by internalised homophobia, which has been known by seven participants.

This is going to sound really negative but everything negative I’ve experienced about being gay(ish), it’s because I’ve taken all this time to come to terms with my fears. If I think someone is looking at us funnily on the train for example, and we’re holding hands and I feel its unsafe and let go. So I do have some anxieties and fears but it’s because of both real and imagined homophobia.

She continues: *“I found everything difficult [laughs but heartfelt]. I didn’t like being different. I didn’t like having to keep my relationships closeted.”* She experiences calm in her relationship of 23 years with her partner, whom she sees to be a gift from God: *“Then I think, hang on, my partner is so lovely, therefore there must be a God, because why would I have been sent this lovely person to live with, and be with, and love?”*

All eleven interviewees have known difficulties within their family of origin caused by their identity as gay or lesbian. David eloquently describes such difficulties:

I remember having an argument with my father when I must have been about fifteen or something and he must have just heard something in what I had said and he said ‘Don’t turn gay on me, please.’ [laughs] I didn’t say

anything but it's always lived with me ever since.

For some, these difficulties have been relatively short lived, but for six others a sense of estrangement remains. Here Stephen speaks of an inner sense of dislocation which began to be healed when he explained to his family that he was about to register a civil partnership:

It creates a dislocation and a sense of anxiety so I had various nightmares always featuring my mother, for several years, really awful nightmares. So this all went away when I sort of opened myself to them.

While long-standing difficulties diminished very slowly in his family of origin, Stephen experienced at the religious celebration of his civil partnership God who is a shield over his new family. This new family is created both by his joining the welcoming family of his partner, and also by building a family of his own, with friends and their children living together with himself and his partner in one shared home. “*I felt... a shield almost, provided by God, and somehow we were under it and were made to feel like his children and also surrounded by the love of our worldly family.*”

It is obviously the case that civil partnership has not had the ability to liberate the participants from all situations of wider societal disapproval. Nevertheless, they all speak of the celebration and validation of themselves and their relationship in the public eye, and of the liberation from secrecy and confusion this brought. Christina is clear that such validation has had a profoundly liberating effect:

Following the civil partnership, and the experience of it, the sense of validation was greater, that it was an experience that was of itself a strengthening experience ... significantly in the wider context of the recognition of it in the relationship, both internally but also in terms of people's reactions to it, which include the family reactions. And that since then, which is eight years now, that seems to have been a process of deepening and strengthening.

The most shocking moment of the process of interviewing arose from my realisation of the amount of violence, bullying, and sexual abuse all eleven interviewees had known. Often these moments arose in the middle of seemingly ordinary, positive conversations, and had the effect of suddenly plunging both interviewee and researcher into an awareness of darkness for which I as researcher was initially unprepared. I was forcibly reminded of Walton's insight that “This is how theology is done” (Walton, 1999, p. 201), as the relationship between researcher and interviewee deepened. Walton writes of creating living theology where the experience of suffering comes to be shared in the process of constructing theology:

“I have brought you to a place in which you may recognise God and know yourself. When you understand this, you can smile at the small stories of human freedom and divine judgement which are told for children. They are charms recited to protect against the passion and the pain. There are darker, deeper tales to tell.” (p. 201)

In particular, three interviewees shared with me their painful experiences of violent bullying or of sexual abuse in childhood. For Vanessa, the guilt involved in being sexually abused as a child became attached to her shame over being lesbian, since a comment was made in her family that there was possibly a causal link between the two experiences. As Vanessa and I entered into dialogue I realised at a visceral level both the depth of her pain, and the profoundly healing nature of her sense of belonging at St. Martin-in-the-Fields. There she had found a theological acceptance of her worth as a person, with affirmation of her sexuality as a gift from God. The nature of God’s unconditional love was experienced by Vanessa for the first time in her life in her relationship with her partner.

“I think because of not growing up in a stable environment, learning to trust people and let them in has always been a struggle...but Alice loved me unconditionally, for all my good and bad”.

God was known in her relationship, while the community, worship and theological life of St. Martin-in-the-Fields, of which my research was a part, provided Vanessa with the words and confidence needed to name that God. Furthermore, Vanessa and I were doing theology in the body, rather than simply in speech, as I sensed how both my listening, thinking presence in the moment, and my research findings of the future, mattered deeply to her.

Similarly, Ted had also known sexual abuse as a child, and had also been beaten up in the street as an adult. He, however, had been supported through adolescence, not least spiritually, to grow in self-acceptance and self-confidence. He was able to create a liberation theology of the body for himself, as a result of this support. Instead of being ashamed when he was accosted as an adult gay man, he was able to allow himself to be outraged that those who had attacked him should treat the human body with so little honour. *“I was really upset that they should think it ok to treat me like that, even if in their minds they knew they were not going to kill me. Such disrespect.”*

Perhaps because I had conducted Stephen’s church celebration of civil partnership with no awareness of his experience as a gay child and young person, I was profoundly moved by discovering a history of bullying there. The strength of his conviction that he had escaped a land of underserved punishment to arrive in a place of freedom and

blessing now made sense.

Beaten up, trying to remember... I was cornered and threatened with violence. At school I was bullied very heavily. I was bullied when I was a young child by other children. I was bullied again as a teenager by the sort of popular guy at school when his mates decided to corner me at the back of the corridor and threatened to tell my father that I was a poofster. I had people calling me names, doing kind of mincing sounds.

I experienced hearing these words, and being silenced by them, as an activity which was prayer-like. To bear these stories with and for the other, as they lived their pain, was to acknowledge with honesty the vulnerable, sometimes frighteningly painful side, of being human in a gay or lesbian body. As a priest-researcher I was knocked sideways by this listening, as I had been by seeing Kitaj's paintings of outsiders. I was reminded of Jesus being "disturbed in spirit and deeply moved" (John, 11:33) as he contemplated the devastating emotional effect on Martha and Mary of their brother Lazarus' death. Yet to do theology in this way also felt at times, at least potentially, like the theological activity of mission. Were these stories important? Might they resonate with the experience of others so that as Church we look together at what brings desolation, what resurrection, to gay and lesbian bodies?

For other participants violence remains a persistent threat. For three female participants, this threat appears to be linked with outward appearance, being lesbian and pregnant, or being lesbian and appearing masculine. Emma ponders this risk further in these terms:

I get looked up and down in a hostile way, by men particularly. Because of that 'What are you—man, woman? I can't place you.' I am not obviously female enough. I am a woman and I feel perfectly happy in my female body and wouldn't want to alter it at all. But other people can react with hostility to that not quite knowing...

For one participant, this not quite knowing what will happen next, in terms of threatened hostility towards her partner, is very stressful:

It also affects things like when we are going away on holiday or at weekends, we are always very conscious of who's going to book into the hotel, how is it going to look, is this going to be a problem? It doesn't matter that it's illegal here for people not to admit us, it's just that we don't want to deal with that hassle. Um, yes, so I would say it has caused significant difficulties. Mostly, I would say it's about always being wary of being put on the spot, what people are going to do, what's going to happen next? And that creates a bit of stress, not between us, but it means that we cannot relax in the same way that other couples do.

Only half joking, one female participant describes the challenge of remaining

safe: “*I suppose there is a little bit of me that thinks it’s the lesser of two evils that they think I am a man as opposed to a butch lesbian!*”

Three research participants have known bullying in the context of work. Anne describes the fear caused by this for her, and the effort to remain brave on behalf of others:

I have seen that [bullying] happening with other people, in terms of the comments made about people who are gay, or perceived as gay, particularly gay men rather than lesbians. I always challenge those comments but thinking nervously, this is about to turn on me. Yes, it does go as far as bullying.

These experiences of bullying, violence or the threat of violence are common for lesbian and gay people. A report⁸ by the charity Stonewall, published on 8th March 2016, highlights how young people at school are the worst affected. There, more than half know direct bullying, one-third of lesbian, gay and bisexual young people find themselves ignored and isolated, and no less than two in five experience suicidal thoughts or the desire to self-harm. These realities are reflected in the narratives of two of my research participants. Stonewall reports that at work, one in five lesbian, gay and bisexual adults experience verbal bullying, and as many as 25 per cent are not open at work about their sexual orientation, as my research participants affirm. In terms of violent hate crime, one sixth of lesbian, gay and bisexual adults have experienced a homophobic incident such as two participants experienced, while 25 per cent alter their behaviour to hide their sexual orientation, from time to time, to avoid the perceived threat of violence, as no less than six interviewees reported.

While civil partnership cannot act as the sole panacea to solve the problem of the violence and bullying caused by homophobic hate, nonetheless it offers liberation in two distinct ways. Firstly, it reflects and consolidates a sense of greater tolerance towards gay and lesbian people in society, and as such is to be supported, as David suggests:

I see it also as important to me in my place in society. Um, for all sorts of reasons but, um, it’s partly about a form of equal recognition. It’s not the same as marriage quite but it felt like that. Um, and it’s partly too, to address some of the consequences of the way gay people have been treated unequally for so long.

⁸ The Stonewall report is at <http://www.stonewall.org.uk/media/lgbt-facts-and-figures>

Secondly, it helps also to create a sense, by virtue of the trust involved in declaring a permanent commitment, of home as a place of non-threat, of haven, of alternative non-competitive values. Anne describes the importance of creating a “*no-blame culture*”, and Emma of enjoying ordinariness, quoting Wendy Cope’s poem, “Being Boring”:

Someone to stay home with was all my desire
And, now that I’ve found a safe mooring,
I’ve just one ambition in life: I aspire
To go on and on being boring.
(Cope, 2001)

Is this Liberation Theology?

In exploring these interviewees’ diverse accounts of liberation, and while considering the question in my own mind—do these accounts amount to a collective theology of liberation?—there was one research participant who stood out as having definitely developed his own gay liberation theology, namely Ted. Ted is a lay theologian, who as a student at an American university was influenced by pastoral chaplains steeped in an understanding of Liberation Theology. They applied this theology to help students accept and enjoy the bodies and their emerging sexual identity, whether this identity was gay or straight. Ted knew Robert Goss, who wrote “*Jesus Acted Up: A Gay and Lesbian Manifesto*” (1993), and was particularly encouraged by the idea that gay couples may be fruitful in terms of their community action in much the same way that the lives of members of a religious community may be “fruitful.” Ted therefore understands himself and his partner to belong most fully on the margins of Church, and it is possible to see a developed theology of liberation in his life story as he recounts this.

Ted now chooses to worship in communities which identify with people who live on the margins of society and when he gets married will do so at Dignity, New York, his church community when he is in the United States. “*The New York thing we anticipate will be the sacrament of marriage, even though it’s officially illicit, from the Roman Catholic hierarchical point of view. But that’s what makes it so nice!*”

But Ted’s account aside, I was still left with the question of whether it is possible, or indeed helpful, to consider the remaining stories from the rest of my interviewees as theologies of liberation, especially where research participants make no explicit reference to it. What is liberation theology, and is the sort of knowledge it reveals demonstrated in these narratives?

Liberation Theology and Queer Liberation Theology: Origins, Methods and Goals.

In 1971 Gustavo Gutiérrez, then professor at the Pontifical Catholic University of Peru, published his seminal work, *A Theology of Liberation*. This was the fruit of the reflection by Latin American theologians in the 1960s, that a Christian interpretation of history was needed, linked to social engagement and action. In Latin America by the end of the 1960s, it was mostly articulated by reference to Marxist analysis, that demonstrated how economic development for some parts of society was linked with underdevelopment for others. Waves of populist movements had previously struggled to address the poor socio-economic conditions of the rural peasants and shanty-town dwellers whose lot was not improved by the rise of industrial development that brought wealth only to the middle and urban working classes. Finding support from an emphasis on human advancement and social progress emerging from many of the official Roman Catholic Church documents of the Second Vatican Council, many Latin American theologians, among others, sought to develop a theology from the impoverished margins of society.

In “*Introducing Liberation Theology*” Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff describe the three levels at which liberation theology is practised (1987, pp.11–21). It is practised at a popular level, in groups of people thinking about faith in community with others. It is practised by pastoral theologians living and working alongside those groups, acting and reflecting on the pastoral concerns of the community. And finally, it is practised by professional theologians speaking to the wider Church and to the academy. What all three levels have in common is a living commitment to emancipatory practice, known in Galatians 5:6 as “Faith working through love.” To do liberation theology is to ask what emancipatory practice may be viable, strategic and co-ordinated as a next, limited stage in moving forwards towards greater freedom for the oppressed group. That practice and its results will then become the cause of further theological thinking in the future. A contemporary British liberation theologian, Christopher Rowland, underlines the potent catechetical and missional power of doing theology in this way. “God’s Word is to be found in the dialectic between the literary memory of the people of God and the continuing story to be discovered in the contemporary world, particularly among those people with whom God has chosen to be identified.” (Rowland, 2007, p.8).

Yet, as Liberation Theology matured and developed it received sustained critique from many factions within and external to the Church. There are two forms of this critique which are significant for this research, and which I will now focus on. Marcella Althaus-Reid, a Latin American theologian, while grateful to her forbears in liberation

theology, nonetheless accused those same theologians of galvanising the prevailing if often invisible ideologies of race, gender and sexuality inherent in their work. Althaus-Reid observed that the lived, embodied reality of the poor is that they are people of different ethnic, sexual and gender identities (Althaus-Reid, 2007, p.126). Those identities determine how even poverty itself may be structured around the binaries of male/female; normal/abnormal; orthodox/heterodox; saint/sinner, and so on. Althaus-Reid contends that this type of hierarchical thinking, with its undergirding structures of power, needs to be submitted to the challenge of Queer Theology in order to begin to deconstruct the theological discourse of a Church intent, Althaus-Reid believed, on controlling human sexuality. “It is time,” she wrote, “to liberate people, and also God, from the oppression of centuries of injustice and abuse towards those who do not partake of patriarchal, heterosexual ideologies.” (p.128). This is to be done by doing what Althaus-Reid calls “honest theology,” which is, she suggests, “a theology able to reflect on the lives of the people and the manifestations of God in our communities, beyond the dogma of a sexual ideology such as heterosexuality.” (p.134). Althaus-Reid believed that one way of doing such honest theology was for gay and lesbian people to tell their stories to and for the Church.

The question arises at this point as to how story turns into theology? Is queer liberation theology simply a matter of telling the stories of gay and lesbian lives in the context of Church? What sort of theological knowledge is attained from the activities of telling, analysing and interpreting these alternative experiences?

In “Action is the Life of All”, the practical theologian Zoe Bennett asks the same sort of question—namely, what will praxis deliver epistemologically? When I identify research participants’ experiences of God in the everyday life of their relationships, is it possible to combine their language of lived human experience with descriptions of the divine and infinite? May I use human practice as a *locus theologicus*, and if so what, Bennett asks, does a Christian epistemology of praxis look like in these circumstances? (2007, p.41). Bennett’s conclusion is that such an epistemology will seek knowledge which is participatory, enabling the integration of human practice into theoretical understanding, and also knowledge which is necessarily provisional, as we cannot know the results of our actions or believe them capable of penetrating fully the mystery of God. Furthermore, such a Christian epistemology will be rooted in Christology, in awareness of the incarnate Son of God and of the Spirit, in the doctrine of Creation, in the discipleship of Christian community, and in witness to others in mission, of truths which are but partially and ambiguously grasped (pp.49–51). In returning to my

research data, if I seek in these accounts a Christian theology of queer liberation, it must also reflect my awareness of these two basic critiques.

A Queer Liberation Theology of Civil Partnership: Fragments, Pebbles, Stepping Stones

Theology which is Participative and Provisional

Research participants all engaged with me in a creative discussion about the theological meaning of civil partnership, and have been open to new meanings revealed to them in the process of this discussion. For example, in the interview itself Sue was caused to think about whether God works in human history, while Lucy reflected as to how the experience of her relationship revealed aspects of God as patience, forgiveness, and tolerance. Meanwhile, Lillian found the discussion itself liberated her into a new way of understanding her relationship as prophetic of God's future. All eleven interviewees sensed their understandings to be provisional as they explored the meaning of God for their lives and also grappled with the status of their relationships given that same-sex civil marriage was on the horizon of possibility for them.

However, they had already participated in creating theology and had themselves liberated language about God from silence and secrecy. It is not only the participants who were led from wilderness to homecoming by their engagement in civil partnership, but images of God were liberated also. Despite the legal injunction prohibiting mention of God in the civil ceremony, seven participants found ways of expressing their faith there, by for example using silence and candlelight, by finding poems, music and song which spoke to them of God. Anne states how important it was for her to understand the public civil rite as a religious service

The service was lovely. We had written the service, and we had, we were very clear that we would have liked some religious ceremony in it if we could but obviously, we weren't allowed to do it in a civil ceremony. We wanted to make sure that we acknowledged that fact as far as we were concerned. We had 'Something Inside So Strong' by Labi Siffre—The walls are the walls of Jericho so we were pleased that we had got that one in! 'The more you refuse to hear my voice the louder I will sing | You hide behind walls of Jericho; your lies will come tumbling'.

The presence of God was also acknowledged by Anne and her partner in the song "I'll walk beside you," which she and her partner interpreted as God's promise to walk beside them. Ted re-wrote the biblical story of Ruth and Naomi as a poem, omitted the word God, and was permitted by the Registrar to use the poem as the basis of his civil partnership vows. Christina found a song which became a famous song of lament for

justice in the Quaker movement, as mentioned in Chapter 9. Sue wrote to the *Church Times* that God was of course present at the rite since God is everywhere and in all things, even if the couple were forced to exchange their vows silently before Him. Lillian used silence, candlelight, with readings from “The Color Purple” and from Martin Luther King to express the couple’s spirituality: *“We couldn’t have religious readings but we tried to make them religious. And the registrar was going to pass as much as he could without getting into trouble. He was very nice, kind of priestly.”*

Hearing how insistently interviewees found ways to give theological content to these civil public rites I began to name them “Coming-Out Ceremonies for God,” places where the queer God was named in non-sacred texts and heard even in silence. The insistence to give space to God is remarkable, given the sharp sense of alienation described by nine participants in terms of their relationship with God at earlier points in their lives. They speak of wrestling with God, as Jacob with the angel, in the quest to gain a greater sense of self-assurance and confidence. Sue gives an example of a conversation running with God earlier in her life, first about her own identity, then about her lesbian partnership:

I struggled in the early days about when I first realised that I was a lesbian, I mean way back then, with the whole God/lesbian thing... At first I couldn’t see how on earth these two things could be remotely compatible. I worked that through over a period of time. So now I suppose that I am in a position where I think that something so good and something so pure—pure is not quite the right word, but sort of, good and honest and truthful and faithful—can’t be wrong but must have something god-ish about it.

Her working it through involved thinking and praying to God as Creator:

There was a one-way conversation and I said, ‘It follows that you must have made me like this. You have either made a mess of this, which I can’t believe, or it’s true, this is the situation. So the only other option is you made me and I happen to be a lesbian so—’ So I came to be at peace with myself about it I suppose.

She describes how her relationship enables her to be more Christ-like: *“God-like, or perhaps better Christ-like...you know that whole thing about honesty and truth and openness and kindness and love...”*

For Lucy, there was a struggle to understand how she could be Christian and lesbian and a mother:

In the past I found myself battling against myself and my faith helped me to go easy on myself, and to forgive myself. Not that I think that I needed forgiving but I tried so hard NOT to be gay and... yes... but, because I really, really wanted children, that’s what I wanted more, really. I couldn’t

work that out... I thought I would have a headache for the rest of my life. I had to get through that to go, 'This is pointless, why am I doing this to myself?'

Finding a partner plays an important part in healing the relationship with God. As many as nine interviewees describe the importance of finding a partner with faith. Anne's partner brought her back to church and to a deeper sense of faith in God. For Stephen and David such a shared Christian faith was essential to the bonding of the relationship: *"Love, mutual respect, self-sacrifice, and also hope. Um, commitment, dedication, and you know I think that that all is derived from [our Christian faith] ..."*

Lillian expresses the urgency for her of finding a partner sympathetic to her Christian faith very early in her life, despite that being difficult: *"I remember having some quite bruising lesbian relationships with women who were very hostile to Christianity, and saying, 'I am a Christian and I go to church and if that's going to be a problem this isn't going to work out.'"*

For Emma falling in love with her partner and falling in love with God happened at the same time.

I was not exactly an atheist when I met my partner but I was certainly not at all churched, not interested in church at all. I started going to church because it was important to her. And then it became important to me, by stealth [laughs]. Falling in love with my partner was a bit like falling in love with God.

Christina describes in clear terms how her knowledge of God has been affected and deepened for her by entry into civil partnership: *"I think I am fundamentally altered by this whole experience, so that my faith and values and, um, world view are not the same. So yes. I think it leads me to be profoundly grateful and my faith is changed by that."*

What I find striking is that neither the quest for God nor the quest for love were sacrificed or ignored by the research interviewees. The experience of love, the safety, challenge, forgiveness and creativity which love brings to these research participants, persuades them that this "queer" love is of God.

In addition to the civil rite celebrated in registry offices, nine participants also held religious celebrations of their partnership in Church. The size and shape of these celebrations varied widely. Christina and her partner held a ceremony of silence with four friends before the larger civil partnership celebration. Robert and Tom held a large event which Tom does not describe as religious but honoring the different spirituality of many people: *"We took account of the spirit of humanity, celebration and love, and*

wove these through song, readings, talk and laughter into the fabric of the service that we ourselves put together.”

Three other couples interviewed held services of thanksgiving and dedication in the context of the Eucharist. Lillian recalls the sense of sacramental presence filling the church and the rite for her:

All I know is that when we had the first ceremony that was a spiritual experience. We were attending Christians, in a Church community, we arrived at the church and the nuns were dotted around the church, you know, they were there praying. And for me I had no idea they were going to do that. They were invited as guests but for me as soon as I arrived that was a physical outward sign that I'm going, this is a sacrament, like getting ordained. This part is a spiritual sacrament.

This inclusion of God where “God” has been officially silenced is particularly meaningful given a context in which the language of “quadruple lock” has been used to safeguard the Church of England from being forced to perform rites of same-sex marriage. It is as if God cannot be locked out from the celebratory marking of these relationships since God is present and active in the participants, who are Church, ecclesia, gatherings of Christians to worship. The research participants, under the threat of exclusion and experiencing the mystery of God’s being even in that exclusion, created liturgy, of which the Brazilian philosopher and Episcopalian priest Maraschin exclaims, “It is liturgy. It is the action of the people gathered for experiencing and experimenting with the joy of being alive. It is bewilderment in the face of the abyss and under the threat of nothing.” (2009, p.176).

Theology which is Christological

In *Writing Methods in Theological Reflection*, Heather Walton describes two significant models of narrative theology which are found in theological life writing (Walton, 2014, p.95). In the first model, described as canonical narrative theology, the story of Jesus is understood as God’s story, and as an interpretative key to the whole of human history. Creators of canonical narrative theology place themselves firmly within this story, and in doing so find their own meaning.

This is evidenced by five participants when they suggest in their own stories a relationship with Christ, which they describe as central to their understanding of themselves in the world. David senses himself to be called to be a part of Jesus’s transformative actions:

Can I talk about this image of celebration, of Jesus turning the water into wine? It is for me an example of a story which is about making the most of

our blessings. Jesus wanted us to have a good time! I firmly believe that! That doesn't mean having a good time at the expense of others. It just means making the most of what you have got in a way that works well.

Matthew understands himself to have been aligned with Christ in his baptism, when he is “*lifted up*” with his partner at the church celebration of his civil partnership. Anne turns to Jesus for support, when she senses herself to be marginalised.

I very much believe in, um, the life of Jesus and the way he behaved, in terms of recognising people on the margins. That gives me the strength to think, well actually, whatever happens in terms of announcements about what's going to happen in the C of E (which upset us on a regular basis) [laughs]... whatever happens in that, I really do firmly believe that if Jesus was here, he would say what a good relationship you two have got.

Others speak in ways more reminiscent of Walton's second model of constructive narrative theology. They make no attempt to fit their own story into an overarching biblical narrative, but rather weave together insights and experiences to create a new story (Walton, 2014, p 95). So Vanessa, as previously mentioned in Chapter 9, finds Christ looking at her out of her partner's face, and particularly in the way each makes sacrifices for the other. “*I do see Christ in Alice every day, which makes me smile, or even when we have an argument. I mean, we have both sacrificed a lot for each other.*” Christina is inspired by Christ seeing beneath the surface of our condemnation of the unknown in his treatment of the woman caught in adultery:

I think that this story where the people and the religious authorities are singling out an individual for brutal and harsh treatment because of something in her life we don't know much about, but a relationship of some kind. And Jesus's careful and effective challenging of those assumptions of the religious authority and replacing that with an expression of love, containment, protection.

Whether they place themselves inside the narrative of God's salvation history in Christ, or weave the Jesus story into many others to create the fabric of their lives, the Christological language these participants use is expressed in the conventional language of official Church of England orthodoxy. They seek no bisexuality, or resistance to androgyny in Christ, such as was sought in gay and lesbian theology and in some feminist theology (Stuart, 2003, p.35). Christ is neither demythologised, nor aligned with the power of Eros in these narratives (p.55). The meaning of Christ's human body to the participants is not used in a queer way to challenge or deconstruct heteronormativity. Rather, participants speak of wishing to grow into Christ's likeness of forgiveness, self-giving, and fullness of life. But there is some partial dissent from

this. Tom has rejected Christianity, and Emma finds language about self-sacrifice unhelpful, especially in relation to women. Nevertheless, the Christology expressed in most narratives is expressed in conventional terms.

So what is going on here? My analysis is that firstly, such apparent conventional Christological beliefs may reflect the mainstream life of congregation members at St. Martin-in-the-Fields, and the sincere hope of a minority group to “fit in” where they may fear disapproval. Secondly, it is possible that my interview questions simply did not empower participants sufficiently to develop their own Christological views in any depth. Thirdly, given my pastoral and priestly roles, research participants may have been hesitant to risk theological offense, by straying into more personal unorthodox language about Christ.

Despite their being embedded in orthodox Anglican Christological language I do detect fragments of a queer Christology in many of these stories. He is known in the queer body and faithful compassion of Vanessa’s partner. He is found in the margins of life where Anne needs his comfort and strength. His subversive role is recognised by Matthew, who asked at the church celebration of his civil partnership to have the biblical reading about Christ bringing division not peace, in order that the celebration be grounded in the reality of gay and lesbian lives as he, growing up in Indonesia, knew them to be. Ironically, Matthew was urged to choose a more celebratory passage for the church celebration. Collectively, my findings would suggest that it has been difficult for gay and lesbian Christians to develop their own imagery and language for the Christ whom they clearly know, and to speak that language and imagery aloud to others. This lack of Christological confidence is significant and would merit further research to explore what this really indicates for this group.

Theology of the Spirit

St. Martin-in-the-Fields is most renowned for service to homeless people, for the enjoyment of music in and outside liturgy, and for the pursuit of questioning faith. Whether as a result of congregation members choosing this church context in which to belong, or as a result of my own theology and consequent framing of an interview question, there is little sign of a developed doctrine of the Holy Spirit in the language of the interviewees. Matthew and Vanessa give the fullest descriptions of understanding the role of the Holy Spirit in their lives. Vanessa understands the Spirit to blossom in power when she and her partner spend time together. *“It’s like an energy that burns inside but is free as well. And that Spirit is sometimes released when Alice and me are*

together sometimes. The Spirit is let out rather than being contained in.” Matthew lives under the guidance and promptings of the Holy Spirit who acts as one continually putting people and tasks into Matthew’s way to consider, as he describes: *“The Holy Spirit puts different things into my lap to do.”* He enjoyed a vision of the church celebration of his relationship as an event in which he and his partner were lifted, supported and sent out like Jesus in his baptism. From there the Spirit has changed his sense of his relationship to itself a channel to be used by God and to be directed by the Spirit. *“I think we keep thinking, what is the relationship between us and the rest of society, and I have sensitivity towards what the Holy Spirit wants me to do next. The radar is full on.”*

However, there are signs of profound connection made between the life of the relationship and the divine life. Four couples pray together, as Stephen describes here,

That sense of kneeling and seeking, praying. That is definitely something which we experience as a pattern in our relationship. The sort of seeking guidance, seeking peace, seeking hope again, um, praying together, that is a very important building block of our relationship.

Lucy sits studying the Bible at home in the company of her partner and child, seeking a faith which concerns the whole of life. *“I’ll sit here with my Bible study books and that’s just how we are. It needs to be part of your whole life rather than just when I am at church.”*

Robert describes this awareness of God’s presence simply, perhaps with an unconscious reference to the brooding of the Spirit. *“It’s the relationship that matters, and this is like a rare and very beautiful bird.”*

Yet a more developed doctrine of the Holy Spirit is missing. It is possible that Emma, in relation to seeing a picture of ecstatic worship or praise, stumbles across a reason for this. Emma enjoys throwing herself deeply into experiences. She is attracted to the worship style of charismatic praise and prayer, yet knows she cannot risk the disapproval she fears accompanies more conservative expressions of faith. It is possible that language rich with resonances about the Holy Spirit has become largely the possession of the charismatic evangelical church.

I have always been drawn to ecstatic worship. But I can’t go there because of what that’s bundled with. But if fundamentalist Christians weren’t so fucking horrible about us, um, I would be a fundamentalist, it’s my personality. I would give it 100% you know, that giving everything, because I like to dive in, I like to be immersed in experience.

The Doctrine of Creation

There are two aspects to the question of how the participants understand themselves within creation. Firstly, do they hold essentialist or constructivist beliefs about their sexuality? Secondly, how do they understand the determination of their sexuality in a theological sense? (Since the questionnaire respondents were not asked about this these comments relate to the interviewees only.)

Five interviewees appear to hold an essentialist view, that sexual orientation is an objective, transcultural fact, and that they themselves have a stable sexual identity which is lesbian or gay. Four others have attempted to live other sexual identities, either as part of sexual exploration as they grew into adulthood, or, for one, because it was culturally dangerous to be “out”. All four demonstrate a sense of liberation in finding and establishing themselves in their present identity. Only two are queer in a constructivist sense, experiencing themselves and others to have a fluid gender and sexual identity. One challenges the fixed binary identities of lesbian and gay and calls herself “gay-ish”. The other is aware of possessing what others understand to be distinctly masculine and feminine features and, similarly eschewing the labels lesbian and gay, describes herself as “genderqueer”.

What are the implications of these understandings for this research? Firstly, it is important for me to notice that I asked no specific questions in interviews about these beliefs since I considered at that stage of my research journey that they would have no direct bearing on decisions and thoughts about civil partnership. What I discovered is that the first group believe themselves to have been created gay and lesbian by God. This belief provides the grounds for self-belief and growth in self-confidence. David explains:

We are all created in the image of God. And essentially because I know what is good within me and what is not I have never had a moral or a religious problem with my sexuality. That goes back to my creation as a child of God in the image of God as we all are.

When she was younger, essentialist belief undergirded the conversations in which Sue reasoned with God about her own future.

There was a one-way conversation and I said, ‘It follows that you must have made me like this. You have either made a mess of this, which I can’t believe, or it’s true, this is the situation. So the only other option is you made me and I happen to be a lesbian.’

The second group is intriguing, perhaps because it represents most closely my

own journey. For them liberation was experienced not from continuing to adopt and experiment with different and opposite sexual identities but from choosing to be gay or lesbian, even at the expense of battling with inner fears and outer disapproval. Lucy describes the relief involved in allowing herself to be lesbian: *“The last two relationships I had been in had been really manky, really, and just hard work. So, it was, to me, like, ‘This is who I am, and this is what I want.’”* For Matthew, the prize for the struggle is a freedom to be his authentic self-in-relationship *“I think in a sense, um, it’s about five years, between the start of the healing process and the civil partnership.”* God is evident for Matthew in this process as he becomes less obsessed with trying to conform to heteronormative patterns of living and more able to be transformed in the direction of self-giving towards his partner.

The two who declared a constructivist view by challenging the title “lesbian” at the beginning of their interviews stand out among this group of research participants for celebrating a same-sex wedding in church many years before their rite of civil partnership and therefore finding the latter slightly less significant for them. They are more critical of the heteropatriarchy⁹ of the Church of England than are other research participants, and more restless in their attitude towards settling in any one Anglican congregation or alternative church. The diversity of God’s queer creation was expressed in a party following their wedding, at which it proved impossible to have “straight” dance columns.

In the evening we had a ceilidh and the whole parish came. There was a caller from church and there was a laugh with that because he said, ‘If we could have, if we could have ladies on the left and men on the left,’ and sort of... and all the gay people said... ‘Oh, all right then, we’ll have some of you on the left and some of you on the right’ [laughter] And we had, you know, lesbians and nuns dancing!

At this point it becomes obvious that I am using the words queer and queer theology in a wide rather than a narrow sense. I reject fundamentalism in relation to queer and queer theology. I acknowledge that detectable in these narratives are strands of orthodox belief, of gay and lesbian protest theology, of essentialist and constructivist views about human sexuality, and of queer liberation theology. I claim the word queer for these theologies believing that they reflect something of what Althaus-Reid called “manifestations of God in our communities, beyond the dogma of a sexual ideology

⁹ Heteropatriarchy is the combination of male, patriarchal and heterosexual dominance in society, and the set of attitudes which consolidates the strength of this dominance.

such as heterosexuality” (2007, p.134). Here are queer people using theology to interrogate patterns of heteronormative belief, liturgy and life. Here are her “aliens within the system,” questioning it from the inside.

Attitudes to the Church of England and the Wider Church

A striking distinction is made by almost all research participants between the enjoyment of being part of the congregation of St. Martin-in-the-Fields and the disappointment and hurt caused by formal church statements voicing disapproval of gay and lesbian people and of their committed long-term relationships. Emma, Lillian, Sue, Anne, Christina, Lucy and Vanessa—all the female participants in the research—have spent time, whether months or years away from Church, rather than continuing to experience this hurt.

Four participants experienced rejection or hurt from family members on religious grounds of disapproval of homosexuality. Many more (nine) experienced particular members of churches prejudiced against their sexual orientation. All thirteen experienced as deeply painful the negativity expressed over long term gay and lesbian relationships in official statements of the Church of England.

Two participants have rejected the Church of England as a place for them to grow spiritually. Emma has left, yet mourns the community she once enjoyed, stating, “*The rising tide of homophobia has put paid to, at least for the present time, my desire to express my faith through Church.*” Her faith in God living at the heart of her partnership, however, remains strong, “*When we married in ’95 we viewed the marriage as a three-way relationship between us and God... without God this three-legged stool would fall over.*”

Tom has rejected Christianity, and has embarked on a quite other spiritual journey which for him spells freedom:

I know nothing of the traditional Christian view of God anywhere, either in marriage or out, in CP or out. ‘God’ as conceived and perceived in conventional Christianity has no meaning for me. What I know of my spiritual existence, and the great benefit and pleasure I derive from being present, not dwelling in the past, or in a fantasy future, and in shedding the chains of an obsession with sin and an all-demanding, never-satisfied ‘God’, has nothing at all to do with marriage, CP or any other human-created institution.

Two participants, by contrast, react with patience to hurtful statements, aided by their understanding of the slow progress of institutional change. David suggests:

Synod has sometimes to me in recent years seemed like a hostile

environment, a hostile organisation, kind of alien to me. And that's because of the gay issue. I feel it vicariously for women too. But as someone who, as I said earlier, quite likes institutions I have a double take on that. And I do believe in the institution of the church and that Synod is part of that. And I think that sometimes one just has to be patient.

Stephen, similarly, reacts negatively to individual church leaders and synod members, but does not believe that the church as an institution is to be hated.

I am angry with individuals and not with institutions. That's generally in my life the case. I belong to a lot of institutions which are ridden with individuals with whom I can have incredibly long arguments but I don't want to dismiss an institution on the basis of some offensive individuals. They are groups of people. People personalise institutions and that's unhelpful.

The remaining nine experience sadness and depression at the release of formal statements from the Church of England which they interpret to be anti-gay. There is little sign that they either wish to be, or are given the collective opportunity to understand in significant theological depth the actions and statements of the wider Church of England concerning homosexuality, or to challenge them in similar depth.

Attitudes towards the Church of St. Martin-in-the-Fields

Despite negative feelings caused by apparently rejecting statements made by formal representatives of the Church of England and the Anglican Communion, discipleship is lived by most (ten) participants in the context of disciplined church attendance and belonging at St. Martin's, which was sought out by all eleven interviewees for its open inclusion of gay and lesbian people. Ted suggests it was known to him as "*the foremost church open and affirming to gay and lesbian people*", while Lucy, coming to live and work in London for the first time, looked it up on gay-friendly websites and was reassured by its emphasis on "inclusion".

Attitudes towards belonging at St. Martin-in-the-Fields vary between huge enjoyment and feeling the need to leave. Three roughly distinct categories are evident among the group of research participants.

For five participants St. Martin-in-the-Fields is experienced as a place of liberation and religious transformation. Vanessa's story bears striking witness to the power of theology and the welcoming community at St. Martin's to transform life.

Vanessa had known violence and abuse in her upbringing. She had found no place of acceptance of her lesbian identity in the Roman Catholic Church of her childhood. In addition, she suffered serious mental illness. Despite this she was a creative person in a

happy civil partnership when seven years ago, seeking to integrate her awareness of God with her sexual orientation as lesbian, she found St. Martin's. She describes the effect of realising through listening to lectures and sermons, by making friends, and using the building when quiet to meditate, a sense of being utterly loved by God.

St. Martin's was a safe place for me to explore my sexuality and my faith together. Before I hadn't found a place to do that. I had to shut the door on Catholicism for a time before I revisited what I thought of God and what my faith was. It was in St. Martin's that I realised, going to the lectures, things like that, you know intellectually stimulating things, it was okay to be gay, and to still be loved by God. And that's something that I have always struggled with my whole life.

Vanessa had always worried that her lesbian identity was linked with the violent abuse of her childhood, that it had a thoroughly evil origin and root. She was set free from this fear by attending a lecture "Wholly, Holy"¹⁰ given by the Vicar of St. Martin-in-the-Fields, the Rev Dr Sam Wells, in response to the invitation of an Anglican pressure group Changing Attitude, which I chaired. By studying this lecture, she was enabled to understand herself and her relationship as gift of God to Church and world. "That's what I took from that lecture. I read it, took my time over it. It's a gift, not something that I am damaged by!"

Lucy's story of belonging at St. Martin's is also about transformation. Lucy had struggled with belonging to a conservative church where neither her gender nor her sexual identity had been accepted in terms of being seen in a positive theological light. "The church that I had been at was very... I was second class because I was female, being gay was kind of just not on the radar." Arriving in London with few friends, and worried about how to grow in faith, she seized on St. Martin's as a safe place to belong.

When I came to London I only wanted to make friends with people who were from Church... because carrying on a faith is hard work and I needed the support. I felt that I should be safe in all respects if I made friends through church and went out with those friends.

She is now a very active member of the community at St. Martin's, while the security of living in civil partnership allows her a more thorough exploration of faith.

David explains how being fully accepted deepens faith and relationship with God, since he senses that he need not hide his sexuality at St. Martin-in-the-Fields, either in conversation, or in prayer.

The convenient way of dealing with that in so many churches is to leave

¹⁰ See footnote 4, in Chapter 2.

your difficult issues at the door of the Church. You don't bring your sexuality in. You would find yourself able to go to Church, communicate with God on a personal level but then go and have coffee afterwards and find yourself unwilling to talk about who you were going on holiday with.

Stephen experienced as “revolutionary” colourful and varied liturgy, the use of reason to explore faith, and the serious pursuit of spirituality as discipline. He found liberating the willingness of the clergy team to support him and his partner in their longing to have a service of prayer to celebrate their civil partnership. His experience is linked with another transformation experienced by participants—that St. Martin-in-the-Fields allowed itself to be engaged and changed in the process of attempting to transform others. Those who asked for a service to celebrate their civil partnership, or who asked for their children to be baptised, played a large part in developing the services. The Church leadership team and congregation absorbed anxiety over possible protest, heard and performed readings and prayers containing pain and celebration, and attended in support, even where this demanded a change of heart and head over the acceptability of homosexual relationships. The tent of St. Martin's was experienced as widened, both momentarily in particular liturgical and educational moments, and permanently in terms of the community's shape, to welcome the queer stranger. Matthew describes the vital importance to him of this sense of reciprocal supportive community.

I think that in the Holy Spirit we were lifted, the symbol is lifted, visible, and supported. So it's just part of the process that we receive the additional strength of being supported, but that with that strength we have more capacity to, um, think about our position for the community.

Three participants, who constitute a second category, are less positive about belonging. One has rejected the Christian faith, and another two have abandoned the effort to express their spirituality in the context of the Church of England. For them, leaving is itself the act of liberation.

For a third category, a further group of five people, St. Martin-in-the-Fields is valued precisely because of its “lack of fuss” over gay and lesbian issues, as Sue strongly expresses this:

It's great being here because although we don't go out and about outing ourselves...we've met quite a few people here. It's just to know they are here, no-one is making a big fuss.... It's nice that we are scattered around and in the clergy team.

It is valued because of the variety and diversity of the congregation, like home or

family as expressed by Vanessa: “Community, all different ages. That’s what I love about church, the sense of community, a sense of belonging... kind of like a home. Also the small group stuff of getting to know people as individuals as well as the whole.”

David, with others, is able to hold in tension patience in the hope of institutional change with a positive enjoyment of belonging.

I mean the great difference in that respect was finding St. Martin’s, which is the first liberal and inclusive church I had been to. Um, previously to that one just had to hope that one would run into kindly and inclusive individuals rather than a whole institution.

I shall return to these differences in the conclusion of this chapter since they may indicate both why this group does not meet regularly and independently of this research with other lesbian and gay members of St. Martin’s, and the possible role of this research.

Mission and Witness

I have discovered that research participants set their stories of liberation in a theological context. In the case of all but one, who understands his liberation to have involved stepping outside Christianity, they understand themselves to have been liberated in some sense by God, who is Creator, Christ and Holy Spirit. Liberated themselves, do they have an attitude of responsibility towards others, to share their experience at liberation? Is there a sense of mission and witness present in their theologies?

For three participants, there is a sense of responsibility for bearing witness to their faith in sensitive ways to their partner. One, Anne, comes to church again regularly, and eagerly follows a life of faith as a result of her partner’s persuasion that she need not worship the Established Church but God. The partners of the other two attend Church activities as supporters, and respect their partner’s positions as Christians.

All participants suggest that their partnership has involved them in a sense of responsibility for family, for being honest with and caring towards both their own family of origin and the family of their partner. Anne speaks of growing closeness to her partner’s family:

I have in fact developed a very close relationship with her parents. I love them and am very fond of them. That’s been really good in terms of supporting them and my partner when her brother died, because they did feel they could talk to me, and do feel they can talk to me.

She also speaks of the more difficult engagement with her own family members in being clear about her own relationship status even where that takes courage, and of her

partner's gentle help in that process.

Six participants take an active and deliberative role in mission as gay and lesbian Christians, though in colourfully different ways. Lucy is able to bear witness to her Christian faith to her neighbours who question her about her regular attendance at church, as does Sue to her work colleagues. For Ted and Matthew, it was important to bear witness by entering the LGBT Pride Parade on the very day of their civil partnership. Stephen and David were glad to come out as both Christian and gay to family and work colleagues at the celebration of their civil partnership in church.

Eleven participants seek greater justice for lesbian and gay members of church and society. Christina, Lillian, Emma, Ted and Matthew have actively campaigned for this; Lillian, Emma and Ted all at times changed town and work circumstances to do so. David accepts that the challenge of the Gospel does not end with furthering lesbian and gay rights and is particularly challenged by the existence of world poverty, as Matthew is by ecological issues, Christina and Vanessa by mental health issues. In all participants, there is a sense of being freed by security in relationship to care for others, as Emma summarises, *"I think I have contributed more to society because I have been happier, it's made me look beyond myself more."*

Conclusions: Stepping stones

In this chapter I have established that there are identifiable stepping stones in a queer liberation theology of civil partnership to be found in these narratives. Whilst research participants had at the point of interview no collective understanding of a shared way forwards to be transformative for the wider institution of St. Martin-in-the-Fields, they were all involved in transformative action in their own lives as is evident above. For a while I was blind to this evidence. Previously, as Lecturer in Inclusive Theology at St. Martin's, I had organised meetings for discussion and action around these issues at the church, and before leaving in 2014 believed that I had set up successors to carry on this work, so was disappointed not to find that no meetings had taken place. However, there is evidence within the data to suggest three reasons for this lack of meeting.

Firstly, to draw attention to gay and lesbian issues may bring the same feelings of lack of personal safety into St. Martin's that exist for some participants in their daily life outside the church community and building. Anne hints at the existence of such fear.

I don't know how 'out' we are when we are at church. So, we are challenging our family but I don't know how much we do it outside in the public world. Maybe we should. And a lot of that's about, and I think we are so used to, being aware of personal safety in public, that we fall into that

role a bit in church, despite that being a very safe environment to be in.

Given the large number in the group of research participants who have known violence, the threat of violence, silencing, or bullying, the motivation not to draw attention to the self in terms of being gay or lesbian may be strong, even if for some this motivation is experienced unconsciously.

Secondly, it is the rich variety of the community of St. Martin's in all its difference that matters to some research participants more than being with other gay and lesbian Christians in an identifiable way. Lucy describes this diversity in contrast to what she sees in a picture of the Church of England General Synod:

And that picture of Synod is exasperating—a number of 55-year-old, balding males. St. Martin's is so different from that! I can't see a black person in that picture, and they seem pretty much all bald. Grr!

Linked to this enjoyment of diversity may be an embrace of Anglican theology and ecclesiology which encourages the slow discussion of such issues as human sexuality in the context of listening to and worship with the other who is different from self. One reason for an apparently accommodating attitude may be a strong belief in moral pluralism resting on the Anglican pillars of scripture, tradition and reason as tools to arrive at and permit different views of Christian truth to flourish in one Church congregation. This view may itself be interpreted as more in sympathy with queer theology and praxis than identification with oppositional positions.

Thirdly, and similarly, other theological, pastoral and liturgical issues may matter equally, as David expresses:

I think that my experience of church is also about all the challenges one faces through church. Um, I think they are becoming increasingly important to me and that's something that St. Martin's has done a lot to inspire in me. I don't mean the gay challenge only, although that is one. There are ones about for example my relative wealth compared to many other people. That is a real challenge to me and increasingly so.

Linked to this attitude is a detestation of victimhood, and of the competitive point scoring which occurs in combative arguments between "sides". James Alison has reflected that victimhood may be perpetuated by angry self-justification, whereas patient turning-of-the-other-cheek reflects more accurately the strength of Jesus's power to resist a bitter battle between sides. To expect all gay and lesbian Christians to adopt a queer liberation theology of identical methods and strategies of struggle may be, ironically, to subvert queer theology's emphasis on the acceptance of difference.

Ways Forward: Accommodation in Community, or Isolated Protest, or a Middle Way?

Research participants agree about three issues, despite their differences about discipleship and protest in the context of Church. Firstly, they are disappointed over the Church of England's lack of formal statements of support for gay and lesbian people and their relationships. Secondly, they share the experience of entering a civil partnership, a step they describe in many different ways as liberating and theologically meaningful, despite the lack of official Church of England support for this step to be taken by gay and lesbian Christians at this time. Thirdly, they agreed to take part in this time-consuming and at times painfully intrusive research process. As part of this process a majority of research participants agreed to attend a meeting for participants' reflection. At this meeting it was agreed by the research participants to ask the Parochial Church Council, the governing body of St. Martin-in-the-Fields, to consider the following actions:

- to hear a presentation of this research;
- to provide an opportunity for its wider discussion at St. Martin's;
- to ensure that the words lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender appear on the website of St. Martin-in-the-Fields;
- to consider the use of snippets from these narratives as part of a wider story-telling project at St. Martin's, which displays the congregation's diverse identity for the purposes of knowing each other better and of outreach to others;
- to display on the website the offer to provide same-sex couples who worship regularly at St. Martin's the opportunity to participate in a service of dedication and thanksgiving following civil partnership, with the Parochial Church Council policy document concerning the same.

A discussion of the process and outcome of these meetings is contained in Chapter 13, the concluding chapter of this research. Meanwhile, since the theme was raised so soon and so frequently within the interviews, and is an issue of such current debate in the Church of England, it is important to ask the questions in Chapter 11, "Is this marriage, or not?" and "If this is queer marriage, what on earth does that look like?"

Chapter 11.

Enduring Love: Is this Marriage or not?

“My image [of civil partnership] is of something permanent, something strongly planted in the landscape, like a tree, which has been growing for a long time and which will stay there for many years to come.”—David

“As a younger man he thought of [marriage] as a consecration of a special set of feelings: tenderness, desire, enthusiasm, longing. However, he now understands that it is also, and just as importantly, an institution, one which is meant to stand fast from year to year without reference to every passing change in the emotions of its participants.” Alain de Botton, 2016, p.182

Introduction 1: Scene Building

As David suggests in the quotation from his interview above, civil partnership is for him, as it is for all twelve other research participants, about making a public commitment to create an enduring life-long relationship of love with another person. This is the love examined by Alain de Botton in *The Course of Love*. In this novel, quoted above, De Botton plots the course of an enduring relationship of marriage between Rabih and Kirsten, and investigates the layers of meaning and experience which lie along its course. De Botton’s intention throughout the novel is to show how little we focus on enduring relationships as crucibles in which to learn the arts of love and courage, preferring to see long-term commitments as prizes for loves which have already reached their goal. Having survived the threats to selfhood involved in receiving his wife’s perceived criticisms, his children’s rudeness, his employers’ callousness, and the temptation to prolong a short affair, Rabih realises that a vital ingredient of his marriage is a happiness which stems from the coherence brought to his life by the “large project” of his marriage (2016, p.83).

For the research participants in this study, civil partnership, with its emphasis on enduring love, represents such a “large project”. Why, then, confuse the large project of civil partnership, the subject of this research, with the equally weighty project of marriage so early in this chapter?

Introduction 2: Scene Shifting

As I planned this research project in 2010 I did not intend to link civil partnership with same-sex marriage, unless it became clear that research participants themselves explicitly made that connection. I changed my intention, however, for four reasons.

Firstly, the media had found early civil partnerships—especially among “celebrities”—newsworthy, and had instantly labelled them “gay weddings”. The imagery of marriage had therefore rapidly surrounded the rite. Then, two years later, in March 2012 as I completed Stage 1, and began to consider interviews as a method to use in Stage 2, the Government Equalities Office published the Equal Marriage Consultation, a widely disseminated consultation paper on same-sex marriage (Government Equalities Office, 2012). This consultation prepared the way for Royal Assent to be given in July 2013 to the Marriage (Same-Sex Couples) Bill, and for the first same-sex marriages to take place in England and Wales in March 2014. Thirdly, I found in three pilot interviews, made at the church of a different denomination, and in another city, in order to refine my interview schedule and skills, the alignment of civil partnership and marriage was quickly made by pilot research participants in their responses to my questions. All three pilot interviewees wanted to be permitted to be married, and had made their civil partnership thanksgiving services very similar to marriage in content and style. Finally, whereas few theologians had written about civil partnership, books, papers and conferences about the theology of gay marriage—already popular in the US, for example, in the work of Goss (1993), Hefling (1996), Rogers (1999, 2002) and Loughlin (2007)—began to appear in the UK. Among the early authors in the UK writing about same-sex marriage were the theologians Stuart (2003) and Alison (2001, 2010). More recently there have followed the Church of England senior clergy John (2012) and Wilson (2014), and the theologians Coakley (2013, 2015), Song (2014), and Hensman (2015). Most recently Davison (2016) and Ozanne (2016) edited and published collections of writings to be read by members of the General Synod of the Church of England for debate in July 2016.

Unsurprisingly in these circumstances all my research interviewees made a swift alignment between civil partnership and marriage in three clear ways. Firstly, the words marriage or wedding were used at some point in the interview, whether fleetingly or deliberately, by 10 of the 13 participants to describe the ceremony or celebration of their civil partnership *before* I asked a direct question about its likeness to marriage. Secondly, even where the words marriage or wedding were not used, or used very fleetingly, civil partnership celebrations were clearly resonant of marriage celebrations. In all cases families and friends were invited or informed; in all cases, special clothes were purchased and luxurious food eaten; in all cases, special photographs were taken and hotel or other smart venues used in preparation or celebration; in many cases speeches were made, hairdressers visited, flowers arranged, and so on. In other words,

the paraphernalia surrounding heterosexual marriages was also embraced by my same-sex research participants. And finally, halfway through each interview I introduced a question about the likeness of civil partnership to marriage, thereby opening the debate explicitly with participants (see Appendix H, question 3).

Nevertheless, I encountered within myself resistance to making this conflation of meanings so soon. As I began writing this chapter, before completing it, I took a serious fall. Fainting at the kitchen sink, I hit my head so hard that I was concussed for a month and could not write. At the time, I made no connection between this incident and my attempt to write this chapter. But as I returned to the chapter, and to the question in its title, I experienced again the strange power of this resistance, and knew that I must examine it for this chapter to be authentic.

At first I imagined my resistance to this swift alignment of meanings to spring from my need to slowly digest new ideas and possibilities—a slowness I describe at the beginning of Chapter 5, where I start to explore Queer Theology. My instinct was to question whether it might not have been useful to experience civil partnership for some decades in order to have time to explore the specific contours of gay and lesbian long-term relationships? Perhaps even, I sensed it made us—me—“special”? I had been looking forward to examining the contours of civil partnership difference in this research. However, I was able to ascertain that my resistance to the alignment of civil partnership and marriage also stemmed from more painful roots. The Bishops of the Church of England had been very cautious about clergy like myself entering civil partnerships, but it was not forbidden. To enter a same-sex civil marriage was, by contrast, forbidden, and if I were to do so, I would run the risk of losing my licence to minister. The House of Bishops Pastoral Statement written in response to the same-sex marriage legislation clearly states that clergy are not to enter same-sex marriage, not to bless the same, nor to use church building to do so (Church of England, 2014). The official prohibition is therefore clear and emphatic.

Since writing well involves the assimilation and consideration of others’ ideas, writing about civil partnership understood by my research participants to be marriage would entail either my inner, possibly dishonest, denial of the appeal and importance of such ideas, or my envisaging for this group something of value which I myself cannot have. Writing necessitated confronting my decision to place my priesthood within the Church of England before my partnership, something I had managed successfully to avoid so far. To write this chapter was to be aware of pain and to find ways of reflecting safely about that pain. It is no wonder, perhaps, that I fell, vomiting up that which was

indigestible, broke my head, and injured my brain, since to go on using my brain was possibly too painful to contemplate for a while. I needed time for reflection.

Introduction 3: Scene Setting

Having examined that resistance, and discovered that the research, with its hermeneutical lens of queer theology, is itself a method of coming to terms, by reading and reflection, with the meaning of being Christian and lesbian, in civil partnership and a priest in the Church of England, I am able to set the scene for this chapter. I begin by stating the obvious, that civil partnership may be understood as a social construction that permits a relationship to be framed and shaped in particular ways. I then examine the layers of meaning and experience contained within this framework. I find that research participants are confused over whether this framework is essentially that of marriage, or not. I establish that most participants (eleven) wish to be married, and that they understand civil partnership relationally to be marriage, although not legally and linguistically. Examining the meaning of marriage as it is expounded in the introduction to the marriage service in the Church of England prayer book *Common Worship*, I identify which aspects of marriage participants wish to retain and re-interpret from a queer theological perspective, and which they wish to challenge or reject. Having created a list of identifiable marks of marriage as so understood, I re-examine my own resistance to exploring this topic and find that it has been overcome in the process of writing.

Civil Partnership: A social construction which supports lifelong mutual commitment.

Vanessa, a research participant, uses this striking picture by Rothko, displayed on her laptop during the interview with me, to describe levels and layers of meaning in her relationship of civil partnership. She understands civil partnership primarily as an enduring framework for her relationship. Sometimes she and her partner act as frames of containment for each other, while sometimes they are the colours within the frame which holds them.

Sometimes Alice is one of the block colours, and she is allowed to go deeper and deeper into whatever she's going through, and I act as the frame around her, like holding her safe. Or I can be the backdrop and sort of propel her out of this kind of ever seemingly block depth of space.

Figure 11: Rothko, M., 1960. *No. 14 (Light, Earth and Blue)* [Oil painting]. Available at <https://theartstack.com/artist/mark-rothko/light-earth-and-blue-1>.



Vanessa goes on to describe the sheer volume and depth of layers of meaning and experience involved:

The eye is constantly shifting, and re-focusing, trying to understand the different perspectives of the space which has been created... and I think that's similar to our relationship because I can't look at my relationship with Alice from just one angle. I am always shifting my perspective because it has been built on so many layers and levels.

Here, Vanessa sounds very like Rabih describing the layers of meaning in marriage in *The Course of Love*:

What has conveniently looked like a single relationship in fact sits across so many evolutions, disconnections, renegotiations, intervals of distance and emotional homecomings that he has in truth gone through at least a dozen

divorces and remarriages—just to the same person. (De Botton, 2016, p.210)

Strikingly, all participants stress the paradigm of faithful committed relationship as the most essential element in this framework. At first this may appear to be a simple copying of heteronormative behaviour and values. Emma suggests that when she participated in her wedding she was simply following established patterns of pursuit, courtship and marriage, while Ted admits that he wants to be married as his parents were. But on further inspection of the data, participants give their own reasons for wanting such commitment, based on their own experience of relationships so far. Ted explains this in his own terms which are associated with re-evaluation counselling:

I think that for me the paradigm, the image, is committed relationship. Co-counselling, re-evaluation counselling, whatever you want to call it... has helped me a lot. It's a spiritual practice. So, part of that spiritual practice is the idea that when you are committed to somebody, when you love somebody, a lot of stuff will come up. Right, so let's get to work on stuff!

Christina, whose image for this social construction is the Rodin sculpture of two different bodies entwined called “The Kiss”, also holds a psychological belief in the importance of permanence as a core value in the relationship: *“I have experienced and believe that for a relationship of love of this kind to flourish and thrive it needs to be secure and not subject to cruel or unnecessary anxieties about whether it will be maintained.”*

All participants are convinced of the importance of the legal aspect of this framework. Its status in law provides for mutual love and responsibility to be earthed in the practical outworking of shared care for the other in terms of finance, property and citizenship provision. For Lucy, shared housing and the shared parenting of her child became possible with civil partnership. For Ted’s partner the right to remain in the UK was afforded by civil partnership. All participants are convinced too, as explained already more fully in Chapter 9, of the importance of the social recognition afforded by the framework of civil partnership.

Among the participants only one, Lucy, voiced that she understood one advantage of this social construction to be that it was new, and that she and her partner could therefore *“do with it what they wanted,”* untrammelled by tradition. This newness was a disadvantage, however, for Matthew, who needs the older framework of marriage to gain social recognition in his home country:

I know how civil partnership is being ridiculed in Indonesia. It's not taken

seriously. If I say to my homophobic friends in Indonesia that I am in a CP then they are likely to respond back 'Yeah, that is one of those things that you do in the western world.' But if I say that I am married, and show them my marriage certificate then I would be taken seriously, I think.

The principal disadvantage of this framework for most (eleven) participants, is that it is not marriage. Or is it marriage, after all, and if so in what sense?

Is this marriage, or not?

Anne is confused. Following her rite of civil partnership, is she married or not? Her lesbian and gay friends assume that she is married. Her partner, albeit in affectionate jest, sometimes calls her “wife”. She feels that she is married. On the other hand, many family members still address her as “Miss” and her mother-in-law, to whom she is very close, acknowledges her as a daughter-in-law in private, but in public as her daughter’s “friend”: *“One of the things I get very cross about is that it’s seen as marriage by all our friends but it’s not marriage for our families, I don’t think. Um, I’m constantly having to reaffirm with some member of my family that it’s a real relationship.”*

She longs to be married in Church, and will settle for no less in the shape of either an equal same-sex civil marriage ceremony, or a church service of prayer and dedication for a civil partnership. *“Really what we want to do and what we have always wanted to do is get married in church, not just being tolerated and not just having a blessing but having a full marriage in church.”* Yet she imagines the possibility of a church wedding to lie a long way off, and possibly not to exist within the span of her lifetime. She clearly understands her civil partnership to be the nearest rite of legal recognition she could obtain to marriage, *“It’s marriage for me because it’s all we can do.”* She calls that rite a “service” and did all she could to acknowledge the presence of God there and within the relationship. More ambivalently, she states that it is not marriage which makes a relationship good, but the commitment—*“having vows and sticking to them”*—which creates the circumstances necessary for a good relationship, and believes too that civil partnership does not mimic marriage but creates a platform for lesbians and gay men to have their relationships recognised.

Stephen places this confusion squarely in the minds of onlookers rather than in his own mind. While he and his partner will certainly get married, as an act of solidarity with all those who have worked for equal marriage, he understands himself, through his civil partnership and church service of prayer and dedication, to be married already. He uses words to describe his marriage status to fit the circumstances, preferring not to offend:

So, people who were present, and who may not have a particularly complex theological agenda...would call that a wedding. And I call it our wedding... Um, I would be careful sometimes to call it a blessing or a thanksgiving service to people who I think may have a particularly... not negative... nuanced approach to it, to the whole concept.

Lillian is convinced that she is married. She understands the rite of civil partnership to have acted as the legal completion of a marriage which took place at a church service of blessing many years ago in 1995. The rite of civil partnership is for her the delayed signing of a register stating that she is married.

Two participants show no sign of unease or confusion over whether they are married, for opposite reasons. They seek neither to be married nor believe that their relationship is one of marriage. Robert writes, *“For us a civil partnership is ideal: it is not a marriage, but confers all the rights and responsibilities of a marriage... traditional marriage suits some people. It’s not for us.”*

Gradually, in the transcripts, a picture emerges of whether participants understand their relationships to be marriage, or not. Christina clarifies this picture by making a distinction between relational understanding, and linguistic and legal understandings of marriage. She suggests:

I think in relationship terms it has the same meaning as marriage... being a publicly stated commitment to an exclusive relationship intended to be, um, life-long to another person, where the, er, purpose is to provide to that other person love and companionship, um, in order to support that person in a relationship of the fullness of love.

However, she is clear on the differences: *“I think it is not the same as marriage. It does not have the same civic, legal or linguistic status as marriage.”*

Civil partnership represents a step in the progress towards equality for these research participants. For all but the two who are content with the civil partnership relationship status, it represents, as Anne describes it, *“the best we could do.”*

The importance of equality

Queer theology, as explained in Chapter 5, began in gay and lesbian theology. These theologies took an essentialist view of human sexuality, arguing that being gay is part of God’s created order. They followed and reflected on the movement for gay and lesbian equality which was precipitated in 1969 when New York police raided the Stonewall bar, and gays and lesbians fought back. Mary Hunt describes the significance of this new movement: “No longer were same-sex relationships simply the stuff of back rooms and Mafia-run bars. Homosexuals were persons with dignity and (eventually) legal

rights equal to all others.” (Hunt, 1991). In 1974, in an early work in gay and lesbian liberation theology, *Loving Women / Loving Men: Gay Liberation and the Church*, Gearhart and Johnson argued that marriage is a covenant relationship and that such a relationship is available to people of any gender. In 1977, in *Towards a Theology of Gay Liberation*, the Christian sociologist Malcolm Macourt outlined a gay liberationist vision for young people who:

...will become aware of a wide variety of life patterns: monogamy—multiple partnerships; partnerships for life—partnerships for a period of mutual growth; same-sex partners—opposite partners—both; chastity; living in community—living in small family units [...] The wish of Christian gay liberationists must be that the choice of pattern which makes most sense to each and every person will be seen by each most clearly to allow them to accord with the injunctions: ‘love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength,’ and, ‘love your neighbour as yourself’ (Mark 12:30). (Macourt, 1977, pp. 24–25)

Influenced by the gay liberation movement participants suggested different motivations for wanting the equality of marriage. Three were personally affronted at standing out as possessing a relationship of civil partnership, making the point that in effect they are “outed” by the knowledge of their relationship status, as Vanessa exclaims: “*Why should we stick out like a sore thumb? I know that our love is just as genuine and as beautiful as the next heterosexual couple. There’s nothing wrong in it and I just feel like we are being labelled.*” Two participants gave theological justification for being treated equally, Ted arguing from a gay liberationist standpoint and David from the diversity of God’s human creation all created in God’s image. Ten gave political reasons. Lillian expresses the longing to be in solidarity with other campaigners, including those concerned for universal human rights for gay and lesbian people:

I volunteer at a large LGBT charity and so many people put their backs into this so that in register offices at least gay people can say they are married. So you don’t have to tick on a form civil partnership [sarcastic] and it’s different and you know with all...with countries that are leaving the Commonwealth and want to treat gay people as second-class citizens and with what’s happening in Russia, I feel proud the Brits are doing it.

Meanwhile, Stephen suggested that to begin to use the language of marriage of civil partnership might eventually lead to progress in equality in the politics of Church and State:

People called them ‘gay weddings’ and then suddenly everyone including

apparently the Bishops in the House of Lords thinks that civil partnerships are great! And the populace at large think they are tantamount to marriage! So you know, I think there is a lot of power in language that we underestimate.

Action for equality, together with being bound together with other gay and lesbian people in protest, is one way of coping with the pressures of belonging to a heteronormative culture. Stephen is clear about this pressure, which he understands as a benign influence:

There are two different influences. You know, here are the straight married friends of ours who have children who are very much part of our lives— They are a positive influence and example. On the other hand, we have other friends who are single, or gay friends who are in open relationships, we know other sorts of relationships out there who would almost pull you in a different direction.

On the other hand, there are signs in these interviews of participants being sensitive towards other types of relationship and of not wishing to impose their own choices on those not wishing or able to live as a couple. Lillian humorously indicated awareness of this tension:

I am really aware that not everybody that's gay or bi or queer or trans is in a relationship. And not everybody wants to be. And some people are in more complicated to define relationships. I have an acquaintance who lives with two partners, one male, one female... When she was describing it, I thought this was quite a challenge for me, because it's quite straight to be married isn't it? [laughs]

A Queer Theology of Marriage

The introduction to the service of marriage in Common Worship, the Church of England Prayer Book, contains these words:

Marriage is a gift of God in creation
through which husband and wife may know the grace of God.
It is given that as man and woman grow together in love and trust,
they shall be united with one another in heart, body and mind,
as Christ is united with his bride, the Church.

The gift of marriage brings husband and wife together
in the delight and tenderness of sexual union
and joyful commitment to the end of their lives.
It is given as the foundation of family life
in which children are [born and] nurtured
and in which each member of the family, in good times and in bad,
may find strength, companionship and comfort,
and grow to maturity in love.

Marriage is a way of life made holy by God,
and blessed by the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ
with those celebrating a wedding at Cana in Galilee.
Marriage is a sign of unity and loyalty
which all should uphold and honour.
It enriches society and strengthens community.
No one should enter into it lightly or selfishly
but reverently and responsibly in the sight of almighty God.
(Church of England, 2016)

Which elements in this introduction do participants retain in their own theology of marriage and which do they modify as a result of their own queer experience of lifelong committed intimate relationships?

A Gift of God in Creation

There is no sign of participants understanding marriage, heterosexual or same-sex, as instituted by God at the creation of the human race. Rather, they understand it as a human institution changing in its nature and emphasis through history as Stephen describes: *“I think marriage as an institution is very much conformed and shaped by the society in which it exists.”* If they allude to the creation narratives of Genesis it is to God’s diverse creation they point, as David does:

Creation is quite important to me in two ways. One is that we are all God’s children. We are all created in the image of God. And essentially because I know what is good within me and what is not I have never had a moral or a religious problem with my sexuality. That goes back to my creation as a child of God in the image of God as we all are.

He uses his experience in a queer way, to test biblical texts and church history for truthfulness to that experience:

What I don’t believe is that literally on the sixth day God created man and the animals. Um, really that’s a very good image to remind us to be careful when we read scripture and to question the experience through to some extent our own feelings, um, and through the history of the Church as well, what is right and what isn’t. And to test those things by what we know of God and the love of God.

Lucy’s theology is less formally articulated than that of David, but unconsciously she paints a word picture of her civil partnership celebration as if she and Sara were in Eden: *“The picture that I sort of think of when I think about our civil partnership are these pictures [hands me a photograph album] where we are kind of walking through the fields... It’s kind of like there’s no real possessions going on here, we’re just together, and out in a field.”*

Only one participant uses the interview to question the essential nature of gender, certain that she possesses both male and female characteristics sufficient to understand herself as “genderqueer.” The remaining interviewees seem not to question binary understandings of gender, viewing themselves as “male” or “female” from birth. This same participant, with three others who are also female, understand their sexuality to be socially constructed, or at least fluid, involving for them choice of sexual orientation. The remaining nine appear to have an essentialist view of their orientation and to see that orientation as a gift from God. If God has so created them, same-sex attraction is also part of that creation.

People living in same-sex relationships however also know the attraction and tension of living with difference. These differences are highlighted in terms of temperament, gift, skill, personal faith, and family background. David highlights a common theme, that difference brings life to these relationships. *“I recognise very much the differences between us and it’s the way we spark off each other that amongst other things makes our relationship a good one I think.”* Ted deepens further our understanding of the importance of living with difference. *“Like I tend to be surprised when I actually... I used to do this a lot earlier in my life when really my life was a lot about me and I didn’t pay as much attention to other people... I would occasionally be surprised that the other person was actually a different person than I thought that they were.”* He spoke of coming to terms with profound differences between himself and his partner in terms of age, race, and economic status, and of his partner sometimes acting as an uncomfortable mirror to his own unconscious prejudices.

Emerging in their understanding of complementing each other in difference are ideas and concepts close to those explored by Anthony Giddens in *The Transformation of Intimacy* (1992), which I first examined in Chapter 4, The Language of Marriage. In this work Giddens suggests we are participants in a sexual revolution. His argument is clustered around three main concepts. These concepts are sexuality which is plastic, the “pure relationship”, and “confluent love”. Sexuality which is plastic is sexuality severed from integration with reproduction (1992, p.27). It is loosed from pre-ordained shapes, from having meaning within bonds of kinship and intergenerational care by being reified, becoming a possession of the individual. A pure relationship (p.58) refers to a situation where a social relation is entered into for its own sake, for what can be derived by each person from a sustained relationship with another. Confluent love demands less acceptance of the romantic idea of “lack” and more willingness to give equally within a relationship, especially in terms of self-communication and sexual relating (p.62).

Experiencing equality, or the struggle to achieve a sense of equality, is a vital part of these relationships. There is a refusal to accept gender-typical roles, although this is verbalised more by the female participants than the male. Vanessa is determined to overturn the gendered roles she sees her heterosexual friends adopting.

We are at the age where a lot of our friends are getting married at the moment. I just don't understand why women take the man's name. And that really upsets me... Also among my friends there are some quite strong-minded people. Yet, when it comes down to things like daily tasks and things like that I find that my female friends will do the majority of the cooking or the majority of the cleaning and it still falls into those, kind of, like, stereotypes and I can't relate to that. I see it more as that we are all different as people and we all have strengths and weaknesses.

Yet there is an understanding too that equality is very difficult to achieve. Stephen demonstrates how it may be rendered even more difficult where competition exists between partners with similar life goals:

He was at a different stage of life from me. I was envisaging that I would build up my sort of life around my career and develop, and perhaps you know, buy my first flat, and then suddenly I am thrown into this other world, where I don't have to worry about these things but at the same time I don't have the sense of achievement that comes with all these things. So, it was a little bit awkward, for quite a bit of time.

Ted suggests how Michel Foucault's understanding of equality as a fluid concept has helped him understand the many changes in status he has undergone in relationship. *"I like something that Michel Foucault wrote when he was about to die. He said that equality is not static. It means sometimes I'm in charge and sometimes you're in charge, and it flows back and forth very easily. It doesn't mean that at any one point we are exactly equal, no."*

This realism about difference and the struggle to achieve equality-in-relationship renders the research participants wary of merger or enmeshment with each other, so that the theological ideas of becoming in marriage one flesh, or of sacrificing self for the other as Christ sacrificed himself for the Church, are critiqued. Christina explains, as do others, that a vital quality of her partnership is remaining distinct, enjoying difference, while fully embracing commitment to the other. Self-sacrifice is understood in this way. The stress in the responses is on being able to freely and willingly give of the self on a daily basis, out of love for the other, rather than submerging need or character into the life of the other. Emma is particularly wary about the idea of self-sacrifice in relation to the history of women and marriage:

The idea of sacrifice for the welfare of the other, mirroring the self-sacrifice of Christ for his church I think is really problematic. Especially for women, I mean women in heterosexual relationships, because of sexism. I think it's not just about sexism but maybe it is especially. One of the parts of the traditional Eucharist that always sticks in my throat a bit is, 'Send us out in the power of the spirit to be a living sacrifice.' And I know what they mean but it's just so easy for women, especially, to take that too far.

There is in the research participants' responses a loosening of pre-ordained shapes of relationships, particularly in the freedom of women to challenge patriarchal values in their closest relationships. Present, too, is the idea of entering a relationship for its own sake, expecting increasingly open communication, and the exposure of vulnerabilities. Certainly, there is a stress on equality in the emotional and practical processes of the relationship.

Yet there is also a clear and insistent emphasis on "growing together in trust and love". The most striking initial finding in conducting the interviews was the stress all participants placed on the intention to live together as partners for life. Christina here voices views common to all the participants: *"I think...a commitment to continuing the relationship through inevitable difficulties is the best way to secure and maintain it as a secure base for mutual flourishing."*

Ted describes an ascetical practice of committed relationship which creates trust and love:

I think that in practicing commitment to my partner I gain the skill of being able to pay attention, make sacrifices when necessary, remember to be happy, all these things. So through the doing, through the everyday living, and remembering to do it, that I'll achieve something that makes me happy ultimately, and him too.

These thoughts of Ted and Christina return us to the idea of marriage, including queer marriage, as a gift of God, as described by the queer theologian Eugene Rogers. For Rogers, marriage is "an ascetic practice of and for the community by which God takes sexuality up and into God's triune life" (1999, p.73). Since we are created as bodies in the image of God, God finds ways to enter into communion with us through our bodies. By our focus on love for one person for life, and by the self-giving which takes place in that relationship (I am reminded of Matthew's *"being transformed in the direction of self-giving"*), God uses bodies in marriage to be transformed into the image of Christ's self-giving love.

The delight and tenderness of sexual union

I asked very few questions about the role of sex in these relationships, inhibited perhaps

by my priestly role with the participants, but perhaps also by my awareness as a former social worker and counsellor that in a one-to-one conversation of considerable length and intensity, held in a confined, private space for the sake of upholding confidentiality, to approach the topic of sex could be construed as intrusive, or inappropriately arousing, or both. As if confirming the wisdom of this approach, I noticed the playful, cheeky tone of conversation about sexual encounter in the pre-civil partnership stages of interviewees' lives. This playful content was lacking in the further discussion of their relationships of civil partnership. I was, after all, acquainted with, and might indeed interview the partner. This was an area of life reserved for their conversation only.

Nevertheless, three aspects of these conversations deserve attention, as they demonstrate participants challenging the Church of England supposed norm of confining sexual activity to heterosexual marriage.

Firstly, participants had sexual experience with other partners before entering this committed relationship. As noted in Chapter 4, and discerned by Alan Wilson, for these participants, marriage has evolved away from the role of societal regulator of sexual behaviour towards that of "relational gold standard" (Wilson, 2014, p.163). Sue had created her own ethics around sex, as had all participants, taken not from Anglican teaching about marriage but from popular culture, and from a sense of the importance of not doing harm in personal relationships:

I couldn't understand how it could be all right, but surely it must be because you know, there were parameters, not sleeping around, not being destructive, the same as if I had been heterosexual, so in the context of a stable loving monogamous relationship it must be all right. So I sort of came to peace with it.

Rowan Williams in *The Body's Grace* suggests that such encounters may themselves be "graceful", a coming home in the body in the experience of another's desire, and may, as in the case of these participants, prompt longing for "the fuller, longer exploration of the body's grace that faithfulness offers" (Williams, 1996).

Secondly, they have no vocation to sexual celibacy within their civil partnerships, as the Church of England House of Bishops suggested ought to be the case for gay and lesbian Christians entering civil partnership to order their financial and legal affairs. Instead they understand their vows of commitment to assist them to remain sexually faithful. David is clear about this:

Now, we are not saints! We remain faithful to each other and everything, but sometimes we don't behave well towards each other but we have promised to do something in a way that we both believe in and those are the

standards which we, um, when we calm down, and after a row or something like that we remember and aspire to.

For Ted, it is the decision to enter a monogamous relationship which indicates a seriousness of intention: *“At that point where I had a tendency to sleep around deciding to be monogamous would be the marker of this is serious.”*

Echoing this change in sexual behaviour when a step of commitment is taken, Eugene Rogers in *Sexuality and the Christian Body* (1999, p.71) understands marriage to be a kind of ascetic practice and argues that conservative protest against same-sex marriage denies same-sex couples “true self-denial” (p.70).

Thirdly, non-heterosexual sex, and sex outside committed relationships are understood as steps on the way to sexual fulfilment within the committed love represented by civil partnership and same-sex marriage. Ted suggests a further depth of meaning to committed sexual love, of risking openness to being known:

It's the place that I end up showing as a person, that's not in a religious community, it's the place that I show the most of myself and try to work the hardest and letting the other person in on so many levels, including on the physical level, which is a whole thing that can't be separated from everything else, right, so, um, I don't say that like it's magical but me that's my sacramental theology.

Rowan Williams writes about the risky vulnerability involved in the “spontaneous exposure” of sex in *The Body's Grace*: “Sexual faithfulness is not an avoidance of risk, but the creation of a context in which grace can abound because there is a commitment not to run away from the perception of the other” (Williams, 1996).

The Foundation of Family Life

I was struck in reading the transcripts how often and positively participants mention creating a home (ten), caring for relatives (nine), sharing household tasks (six). Sue talks of a home in which tasks are shared, time is spent together: *“We just do logical splits—whoever is better at something because obviously we don't have the gender thing... I think we are our favourite people.”* The couple also finds deliberate ways to balance the separate/together-ness continuum all relationships face: *“We put in the diary times when we are going to go off and do other things and times when we are going to be together. We have ‘keep frees’ and ‘outs’.”*

Part of home-making for these Christians is prayer, worship and Bible-study within the home. Rogers writes that, “Christian marriage for lesbian and gay people [...] is a community, a little polity, a *micrabasileia*, a domestic church, a way of life under

God...” (1999, p.29). Anne speaks of placing prayer at the heart of her home with her partner:

We want to always make sure that we give time and space to God within the relationship. I mean we always get a Lent Book and an Advent Book and we read it together on a daily basis, because that's something we want to do. There was a period of time, before we came to St. Martin's, where we couldn't find a church we wanted to go to, so we had our own services. And that wasn't something we just felt we ought to do, but something we really wanted to do... So we are very faithful, I suppose, we want to include God in our life.

Lucy, similarly, talks of pursuing Bible study in her family home, as her grandmother taught her to do:

My granny taught me to read by the Bible when I was very little and my Mum was unwell. So it's kind of a comforting thing. But now in this partnership I feel secure enough to read more than the words. And what I normally tell people like my friend whose daughter I sometimes look after and she says 'How can you be a Christian if you're gay?' And I say it's more about the message than the words.

Another part of home building, care for relatives, takes all kinds of shapes and forms. David shares a country home not only with his partner but also with two old friends, their best friends, and their children. Lucy always wanted children and now has two. She suggests that both she and her partner, caught on camera or in a painting would be looking at the children and not at each other. Anne talks movingly of being accepted into her partner's smaller family, and is one of several interviewees who values newfound warm support in a different family. Emma laughingly admits the cost of this care. She recalls the story of Ruth's loyalty to Naomi's family whenever she herself has no great desire to visit a demanding relative of her partner's family. Ted wryly admits that his partner seems more popular with some of his nieces and nephews than he is himself. Completely contrary to Giddens' predictions of modern relationships in *The Transformation of Intimacy* (1992) there is no severing of links with either children or intergenerational care in this group of research participants. One is a parent already; another looks forward to being so; two others share their home with a family which includes children; four regularly visit the children of friends and siblings. Four interviewees are closely involved in high levels of intergenerational care, while nine regularly visit parents or family, their own or that of their partner.

In addition to this sense of making home and welcoming family there is a strong sense of being called to serve the community in the transcripts, whether that community

is local, national or international, gay or straight, Christian or non-Christian. Emma speaks of the stability of her relationship helping to stretch her “*beyond [her]self and into the community*” while David senses God’s guidance in this turning towards the needs of others: “*Your love can be good not only to yourselves but also as an example to others and can somehow improve things for yourselves and others...that is an example of doing what God has led you to do.*”

But what of home-making for the purpose of the procreation of children? In “Fecundity: Sex and Social Reproduction”, Chapter 5 of *Queer Theology: Rethinking the Western Body* (Loughlin, 2007), David Matzko McCarthy rethinks the meaning of fruitfulness in intimate committed long-term relationships. He suggests that the social body may be mediated through sexual practices, not only by the procreation of children, but by the creation of households in which there is space for committed belonging over time. This fruitfulness births three “bodies” which give theological weight to the interviewee’s love of home. Firstly, this fecundity gives birth to a connected sexual and social life. Instead of sex being considered at its best “natural”, “wild”, “pre-social”, “nomadic” (McCarthy, 2007, p.93)—ideas which lead ultimately to disloyalty being approved over stability—sex may be more appropriately subsumed by the character of household, creating bonds of family, home, hospitality. My research interviewee Sue involves her partner in the care of her parents, which her partner much enjoys. She tells a humorous tale of how her parents, in order to be hospitable to the sexual reality of her relationship, over time altered bedroom arrangements they once deemed “proper” by ridding themselves of a “z-bed” add-on. Not only was her mother’s perception of her daughter’s sexual relationship changed, but so was the meaning she gave to “family” and “household”. Secondly, sex which is about mutual belonging rather than the immediate gratification of desire gives birth to a belonging over time such that our presence cannot be exchanged for that of another. Our bodies are made by each other and known to each other as we learn to bear each other’s presence in everyday life. So we create what McCarthy calls “the grammar of a shared life” (p.95)—sleeping in the same bed, breaking bread, offering our bodily presence in sickness and health. Thirdly, such fruitfulness gives birth to sex as passionate play, honouring the life-cycle and its rhythms, instead of being valued for the rekindling of youthful inexhaustible desire. David is clear that he and his partner are “not saints” and may be tempted by attraction to another, but that he wishes to build something other, a relationship to last over a lifetime. Stephen admits he had fears of losing “romance” in making a relationship more permanent, and that romantic play remains an important element in the

relationship between him and his partner. For Sue, this entails not merging into the other, or letting the relationship lose its sexual dynamic, but working at offering the other both time for the other, and space from the other.

McCarthy suggests that same-sex unions may produce these three fruits. They may be procreative precisely by creating home, being present sexually to each other over time, repeating everyday activities in a shared space, shaping social self and social world in imitation of Christ, by ordinary self-giving to the other and the world. My interviewees, as expressed above in the accounts of Sue, Ted, David and Stephen, were acquainted with this sense of fruitfulness in their relationships of civil partnership.

Made Holy by God

How do these research participants understand God to sanctify their relationships, as heterosexual marriages are described as being made holy by God? To express something of the relationship's dependency on God's activity five participants explore the biblical imagery of the word "covenant". Emma likens her relationship to a three-legged stool: *"When we married in 1995 we viewed the marriage as a three-way relationship, between us and God... Without God, this three-legged stool would fall over."* David explores what this covenantal aspect means for him and his partner.

For me, the ceremony and the vows we made in church had the nature of a covenant because they were promises and as Christians they were even more significant than that because they weren't just promises between me and my partner but there was certainly a three-way contract between me, my partner and God, witnessed importantly by our family and friends and supporters. And it was important that the ceremony was conducted by a minister of the Church.

For many theologians exploring the theological meanings in same-sex relationships, the theme of marriage as a covenant with God has been a rich seam to mine. Pertinent to our exploration of research participants' understanding of their relationships as being reflective of God's covenant love with his people is Robert Song's focus in *Covenant Calling: Towards a Theology of Same-Sex Relationships* (2014) on faithfulness, mutuality and fruitfulness as signs of that reflection, and his sense of human relationships looking for future consummation in the Resurrection. There is a strong sense in Sue's interpretation of her relationship of *"becoming more Christ-like"* and in Matthew's of *"becoming transformed in the direction of self-giving,"* of this moving towards a future consummation. Sue and Matthew's interpretations of living in a covenant relationship with God are also resonant with the language of Jensen in *God's Desire for Us: Reformed Theology and the Question of*

Same-Sex Marriage (2006). For Jensen, marriage is a covenant, a partnership, an intimation of God's relationship with God's people, given as a gift from God for the wellbeing of the couple and the community. The desire for marriage is not merely desire for sex but for the whole person with whom one journeys under the mystery of God's grace for life. In the reform tradition, all human relating is understood to be broken and God's grace a gift to which we respond feebly as we confess our need for communion with God and with each other. In this tradition, the married couple is always on a journey towards Christian marriage in covenant pledged for a lifetime before God and the community of faith. The elements that authorise a Christian marriage are the promises of God, echoed in the promises of the couple, and the community of faith. "The witness of same-sex couples in the Church, the Body of Christ, may suggest that these couples already live under the law of marriage, even when ecclesial practice and societal law refuse them access to marriage." (Jensen, 2006, p.18).

Matthew's understanding of what happened at his civil partnership and at the religious celebration of that partnership is resonant with this understanding.

Being in a civil partnership means that in addition to being committed to the other person, to my partner, I also keep questioning of self what is the place of ourselves as a couple in our community? I think that in the Holy Spirit we were lifted... visible, and supported... with that strength we have more capacity to, um, think about our position for the community.

Matthew's interview is rich in a spiritual understanding of his relationship. He seems, to his own surprise, to indeed live under the law of marriage as Jensen suggests same-sex couples may. He struggles, since English is not his first language, to articulate the truth that he perceives himself to be doing the prophetic work of God in same-sex marriage, even while being in a civil partnership. In terms of God's prophetic agency, he considers himself to be already married.

Well, we want this marriage. Um. That's the goal. But the CP is the same or not the same. Um, I treat it in the same way, at least in relation to, er, um, in relationship to the development... So in relation to the growth, it's not like I am not married, not involved in this prophetic work for example...

If covenant means promise of faithfulness, presence, journey and interaction with God, it also means for Stephen living under the protective canopy of God. He describes the rite of religious celebration of his civil partnership, which he calls a wedding, "like some sort of umbrella, a shield almost, provided by God, and somehow we were under it and were made to feel like his children..."

Here there is a mystical understanding of covenant love which resembles that of

Rogers in his writing about same-sex marriage. Since we are created as bodies in the image of God, God finds ways to enter into communion with us through our bodies. By our focus on love for one person for life, and by the self-giving which takes place in that relationship, God uses bodies in marriage to be transformed into the image of Christ's desire for us his Church, and of his self-giving to us through the offering of his body. The communion which flows from God to interpenetrate the couple in marriage is one demonstration of God's desire for us (1999, pp.67–85).

Conclusion: Scene Building

At this chapter's end, having analysed and reflected over these research interviews, I reach steps on the road towards a new definition of Christian marriage which includes the long term committed relationships of same-sex couples. I find that participants enjoy the use of the theology of marriage found in *Common Worship* while overturning parts of that theology and investing other parts with queer meaning. I suggest that the identification marks of such marriages are these:

- The intention to love and care for the other for life, and to be open to the possibility of being loved and known by the other for life. This intention rests on the possibility of growing in forgiveness and trust towards the other, of growing more Christ-like in that love.
- The promise to maintain faithfulness, to strive for equality, to enjoy the differences within the relationship, and to struggle for transformation in the direction of self-giving.
- The vow to create a household in which tasks are shared, sex is enjoyed as non-productive, non-competitive play, space is created for togetherness and apartness, and into which family and friends are welcomed.
- The hope to use the energy created by such stability to serve the community.
- The understanding that God as Trinity has been present in whatever suffering the partners may have endured, or whatever suffering they may yet endure, to rescue and to be alongside.
- The faith that God as Son is present wherever the couple's table feasts are stretched to include the stranger who may be alone and in need as they were once.
- The trust that God the Spirit will bring all things to a completion of God's love which both is present and is to come.

Conclusion: Scene Shifting

The queer theologian Althaus-Reid complained that in the rush to gain equality of opportunity between women and men in the Church, feminist theology lost the capacity to continue to sharpen a feminist deconstruction of heteropatriarchy in theology and church.

The historical feminist liberationists...have not yet completely come to terms with gender issues beyond the equality paradigm. For them, sexuality tends to be seen as a frivolous distraction from issues of social justice and women's rights in the Church. In a sense, they see queer theologies as a luxury. (Althaus-Reid, 2008, p.106)

As a woman who became a priest in the first wave of Church of England ordinations in 1994 I am sympathetic to this criticism. Feminist theology, after enjoying a burst of creativity for twenty years around the fringes of the Church of England before those ordinations, has been safely side-lined in the Church's liturgy, preaching and teaching as we engaged in the next struggle for women to become bishops. To effect this next change, women who were ordained effectively became male priests, and our success in gaining further power within the hierarchy became predicated largely on our ability both to fit into that male hierarchy, and to excel in the roles offered.

This rush for towards equality for gay and lesbian people to be married may, however, have a more lasting effect since our presence in the institution of marriage "queers" marriage in highly visible ways. It queers the language of marriage since gay and lesbian partners cannot be husband-and-wife. It queers assumed gender roles and power differentiations since within a same-sex relationship these roles, as we have seen, must be determined by other means. It queers the meaning and the means of procreation, whether children are born to the marriage or not. It queers heteronormative assumptions about sex, and its potential role in the growth towards holiness. It queers the meaning and place of God's blessing. As Emma exulted in her interview:

I think that by being in a marriage we are subverting heterosexual norms within society. And I love that! You know I have had many discussions with feminist lesbian friends about marriage and patriarchy. Why they may want to be in a civil partnership rather than a marriage because of what queer means. But I think there is nothing queerer than two women or two men being in a marriage. It's fantastic.

Conclusion: Scene Setting

In another kitchen of my life I propped a picture postcard of a desert in winter. Underneath the picture was a phrase, "He shall bring thy summer out of winter, though

thou know no spring”—words from a sermon by John Donne. This was a scene in my kitchen a quarter of a century ago, when I had recently met my partner, who with her lavender 2CV, black trilby, and brown leather rucksack brought spring. The loneliness of finding myself lesbian, yet detesting the ghettos and closets of the gay life then apparently on offer to me in a provincial city; the anxiety and depression involved in weathering the abhorrence of members of my family; the fear of facing the disapproval of conservative Christians; all these difficulties, which had for me created winter, paled into insignificance in the light of meeting someone worthy of my love who happened to love me. Those difficulties, save the first, raised their ugly heads from time to time, but nothing could hide the fact from myself or from others that I had been raised to an utterly new kind of life. Winter had become summer, almost overnight.

As a Christian who seemingly by chance had happily collided with another Christian for a few hours at a weekend conference, this new partnership was experienced as an intervention by God for my healing, as a way to understand what the love of Christ feels like, as a raising to new life of faith and trust in another by the Holy Spirit. It has always been very difficult therefore to read or hear official statements of the Church of England proposing that what I found to be life-giving is the opposite. I had become used to this state of affairs, surviving or thriving by circling myself around with approving individuals and groups, even individual church congregations. Yet I had continued to live a split in my thinking between myself as “good church person” and “bad protesting lesbian.”

One significant result of pursuing this research, particularly the pursuit of the question of the theological meanings of same-sex marriage, which involves the detailed theological discussion of queer relationships, is the space and time it has afforded me to set my own experience of God-in-relationship in the context of queer theology. The work of Eugene Rogers, particularly, in his description of marriage, has helped me to articulate the sense I have always had that my relationship constitutes a significant act of God’s creation: “Marriage is in microcosm a theatre of God’s glory, a place where human beings—not just the spouses but also the neighbours—are allowed to witness creation as a significant act of God” (1999, p.214). I like the simple directness with which he writes that if there are gay and lesbian persons then God is committed to find means to bring them into an understanding of love, since that is what I sense happened to me. I had no such means of understanding love, and then they were provided. He helps me understand how difficult and indeed dangerous it may be to deny such a movement of God’s Spirit, which, it seems, gay and lesbian Christians are frequently

asked to do. What else is suppressed in our spiritual life, if the quickening of love and its realisation as a good is suppressed, since, “The celebration, blessing and witnessing of a human wedding may catch up human beings by the Spirit into the very inner love and life of God”? (p.196).

In official statements of the Church of England, it has been suggested that lesbian and gay Christians question the goodness of experiences they have found to be for them the very sources of life and healing. Occasionally, such as in October 1998, when I had recently been inducted as the Rector of Soho, parish priests were asked to read these statements aloud to congregations after the main Sunday service of the week, as if they were the Word of God, a second sermon of the day. I was too embarrassed to do this, so conducted these readings aloud privately, inviting the congregation to join me, and to add their own interpretations and comments, which they did with healing laughter about bishops and guffaws about “glass houses”. Kind jokes notwithstanding, the process was excruciatingly painful.

In interviews and reading for this research project I have been enabled to reflect on this painful experience, using it as a vantage point from which to reconfigure theology in two ways. In the first place, I have met Christians who have had the courage to defy the challenge to their entering upon civil partnership or marriage, but not to deny the “reflex of a desiring God.” (Rogers, 1999, p.232). The pain of not being able to be both Church of England priest and legally married to my wife remains, but Jensen helpfully reminds me that I am married in all but the name of ecclesial law (2006). I may therefore continue as a useful Althaus-Reid transformative “alien”, or “voyeur” (2003, p.7), who has multiple passports within the system of the Church of England.

However, I also understand the meaning of this pain in a new way. In her queer demythologisation of liberation theology, reflecting on the relationships between power, poverty and sexuality, Althaus-Reid complained that in the liberation theology of South America, heterosexuality had become “sacralised to the point of not allowing it to be interrogated” (2003, p.130). In its many official statements, I see that the House of Bishops of the Church of England has become preoccupied with controlling sexuality. I understand, too, that when love is revealed in transgressive forms, as it is in this research, heteronormative theology is threatened, because new faces of God become exposed. The myriad ways we understand God are revealed to be uncontrollable. My pain of being excluded continues to exist, but it is for me the route to being “surprised by God” (p.130).

Alison further transforms by his interpretation the nature of this pain. For him it is

a sign that Christian belief and trust in God are not being used as power over another, to control them, or as the manipulative power of the victim, who claims the moral right of “underdog.” He calls this position the “space of the heart-close-to-cracking” (2001, p.387). Here in this “space of the heart” I recognise that I do not need to join in the game of obedience to a controlling male church. Nor do I need to spend my life in angry outraged protest. I may join in debate with those who will listen in that church, not hoping to “win”, but to permit my “emotional and mental structures [to] begin to absorb what is meant by the vivaciousness of the Creator God who brings into being and sustains all things” (p.391). I have a queer place to reside, in which the artificially sacred is to be continuously deconstructed, for a non-violent, loving, queer God to appear among us, God’s people.

Chapter 12.

Queer Theology: A Queer Place to Reside

“But, childish soul that I am, I then get so madly sore at heart
and miserable that I fling my rusty thanksgiving lyre in the smug
face of the drowsy god of contentment and opt for a true,
devilish pain burning inside me rather than this room
temperature so easy on the stomach.” (Hesse, H., 1955,
Steppenwolf)

In his novel *Steppenwolf*, the author Herman Hesse describes a man who, for a while, goes unrecognised in his true identity in civilised society, but who by virtue of his other identity, as “Steppenwolf”, frequently falls into another world. He slips between the cracks in the floorboards of German bourgeois society, and, in his identity as wolf, critiques that society, observing its strengths and weaknesses from the position of insider/outsider. Utterly lonely, belonging nowhere, Steppenwolf is advised in a philosophical tract that he will find healing only when he ends this war between two sharply opposing identities, by realising that within him, as within everyone else, lie myriad selves. Hesse explains how, in his view, we struggle to construct a unified self from thousands of alternative selves: “Harry (Steppenwolf) is not made up of two characters, but of hundreds, of thousands. His life, like that of every human being, does not oscillate between two poles only—say between the body and the mind or spirit, between the saint and the profligate—but between thousands, between innumerable polar opposites.” (Hesse, 1955, p.61).

In my thesis, queer theology takes on the role of the Steppenwolf, critiquing not German bourgeois values but instead the assumption made in official Church statements concerning homosexuality that there is only one definitive theology to be used to describe both the being of God and the relationships of human beings with God and with each other, which is both heteronormative and hetero-patriarchal. It does this not with the pretence of being one whole, solid, all-encompassing, systematic theology. It is instead one strand, one conceptual tool, one hermeneutical lens to use among many in the construction of theology. In this chapter, I summarise how I arrived at the construction of queer theology in the analysis and interpretation of my research findings. I discuss what queer theology has to offer myself as practical theologian seeking theological meaning in gay and lesbian relationships. In realising its many dimensions and paths I choose the directions within queer theology which I wish to follow, and state how these choices arise from pursuing this research in the context of my own life story.

Before investigating paths in queer theology identified in this research, it is first important for me to add three points of clarification about what I am attempting by the use of queer theology. First, having immersed myself in the accounts of my research participants, endeavouring to interpret the meanings they gave to their relationships, it is my interpretation, not theirs, that here there is queer theology. Of the thirteen participants, only two use the word “queer” and only one the phrase “queer theology.” Nonetheless, it is precisely because they are gay and lesbian, enjoying “transgressive relationships,” and within that place are experiencing and journeying with God, that I ultimately call the theology they create queer.

Second, in calling God “queer”, I speak of human language about God, not of the being of God-self, since I cannot and do not claim to know that God-self in Him/Herself. I may believe that I know queer revelations of God, and as a Christian, experience the queer revelation of God in Jesus of Nazareth. Yet to know God is not to point to, know or possess an object—that is idolatry—but is instead a way to describe putting myself into the hands of unknowable mystery, who is to be worshipped, explored and related to dynamically in Christ. This “not knowing” of God is an essential aspect of traditional theology restated by its new, wayward, queer offspring. Queerness cannot be easily pinned down, and may indeed open the way to an apophatic understanding of God. The theologian Gerard Loughlin reminds us how this new queer thought is but borrowed, but traceable within the Christian tradition: “God’s being is indubitable but radically unknowable, and any theology that forgets this is undeniably straight, not queer...” (Loughlin 2007, p.10). We cannot say what God is, or what queer is. We can instead point to queer theology’s activity of leading us beyond present understandings and definitions of what it is to be God, and what it is to be human.

Third, when I gave this thesis the title “Something Borrowed, Something New” I thought initially of what theologies of civil partnership would “borrow” from traditional Christian theologies of marriage, recalling the wedding rhyme that a bride should wear “Something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue.” Queer theology, however, is present throughout Christian history, yet brings new insights to the table of a theology of human relationships for the early third millennium. It is indeed something both old and new, simultaneously.

In the following sections of this chapter I re-examine, briefly, the queer theology explored in the interpretative chapters 9–11 of this thesis. I state how different developments in queer theology may be used to explore these findings. I identify which directions in queer theology I choose to follow. Finally, in a last section, I show how a

queer analysis of the theological concept of self-giving in sexual relationships works to throw new light on the meaning of same-sex relationships such as civil partnerships. I do this to demonstrate the usefulness and rigour of queer theology used as a tool to enrich Christian theology concerning all human bodies in sexual relationships.

A queer understanding of the presence of God: Queer Sacramental Theology

In understanding the relationships of my research participants to be sacramental in nature, I interpreted God's presence to be experienced in secular as well as sacred life circumstances and events. Gay and lesbian Christians, describing an awareness of the divine in their relationships of transgressive love, heal disconnections in our interpretations of our human experiences of love and of God between body and spirit, earth and heaven, eroticism and prayerfulness, faithfulness and aberrancy, the sacred and the profane. Queer theology finds this healing of dualism to be at the heart of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, sensing there a God who is present in rebellion and diversity as much as in propriety and order. In God's salvation history, the person chosen by God to lead Israel is the rascal Jacob; the woman chosen to save Israel is the harlot Rahab who is an ancestor of Jesus of Nazareth; and later, the first theologian apostle to the Gentiles is Paul, a mass murderer of Christians. To stretch our theological imagination further, as Graham Ward suggests, the new creation of the world, in the incarnation of Christ, necessarily destabilises our traditional categories of human gender, let alone our gendered interpretations of God:

The baby boy is husband and bridegroom, spouse and refigured love of the other who gives him birth, whose own body swells to contain the future Church ... Jesus' body is brought within a complex network of sexualised symbolic relations that confound incest and the sacred. (Ward, 1999, pp.164–165).

Many theologians have combed Christian theology, including sacramental theology, to find a queer God. For Graham Ward, the body of Christ is queer, and Christians are incorporated into this queer body in the Eucharist, sharing in its sacramental flesh (1999, p.176). Eugene Rogers emphasises baptism, in which we are incorporated into the death of Christ, and made a new creation, to deconstruct the whole notion of what we understand by "the natural" (Rogers, 1999, p.65). Stuart's understanding of this grace of God leads her to insist that it is our baptismal identity which usefully subverts all sexual and gender identities. She perceives this subversion to be queer theology's greatest contribution to Christian theology, demonstrating how sexual and gender identities "are constructed in the context of power and are part of a

matrix of dominance and exclusion.” (Stuart, 2007, p.68). Stuart ends “Sacramental Flesh,” a chapter concerning these queer sacramental presences of God in *Queer Theology: Rethinking the Western Body* (Loughlin, 2007, pp. 65–75), with a consideration of the sacramental nature of death itself. In death, we experience the final destruction of our sexual and gendered identity, yet our source of hope remains in our being initiated into the paschal mystery of Christ in our baptism. “All bonds, associations and worldly achievements pale into insignificance beside the status of the deceased as a baptised member of the body of Christ.” (Stuart, 2007, p.74).

To summarise, Ward, Stuart and Rogers demonstrate myriad ways in which queer sacramental theology has developed as a conceptual tool, deconstructing all categories of gender and sexual identity by appeal to traditional theology. Stuart pushes this method of deconstruction to its ultimate conclusion, writing that, “The Church is the only community under a direct mandate to be queer, and it is only within the Church that queer theory reaches its telos...” (2007, p.75). She continues, “Queer flesh is sacramental flesh nudging the queer performer towards the eschatological horizon and sacramental flesh is queer flesh nudging the Christian towards the realisation that in Christ maleness and femaleness and gay and straight are categories that dissolve before the throne of grace where only the garment of baptism remains.” (p.75).

In the context of my own life and research, this direction in queer theology, this understanding of what it means to be a sign of God’s queer presence, renders me uneasy. My research participants believed that they both were, and had seen, signs of God’s love in their relationship. Yet the relationship was first experienced as a desire of heart and body for another human person. What seems missing in this development of queer sacramental theology is emphasis on queer bodies, relating in strange circumstances, to a God who is larger and stranger than the God of the Church, and who delivers gay and lesbian Christians from that Church’s oppressive mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. I seek a queer sacramental theology which honours “the complex human web” (Miller-McLemore, 1993, p.367–369) of embodied relationships rather than smoothing over the potentially wild diversity of gender and sexual difference in which God may be known. I seek God’s face in ungraceful circumstances, and God’s voice outside the constraints of traditional Christian worship.

I am urged to spread a wide net to capture signs of God’s presence by remembering moments in my ministry in Soho. Following one murder of a gay man, a young dancer/choreographer who worshipped with us, we worked with bodies from parish and community to create a stage play of grief and resistance to homophobia at the

Soho Theatre. Was that not a sacrament? When the London Gay Men's Chorus cried out the gay hymn "Over the Rainbow" in their sorrow at the death of yet another friend to AIDS, was that not a sacramental moment? Was God not present there in feather boa, make-up and lament? My research participants recalled similar non-church sacramental moments: bodies, both gay and straight, nuns and lay-people, trying to figure out which dancing column to join at a post-wedding barn dance; two men wearing "just married" sashes at a Gay Pride Parade, where for once Christians were applauded not jeered; or simply moments of admitting God's presence in the silent worship of devout hearts at a civil partnership ceremony. The God of these queer sacraments does not need obedience framed in orthodox Christian language. One research participant was freed from the oppressive constraints of "guilt" and "sin", precisely by losing the Christian God; another was revolted as a feminist by the idea of alignment of self with the death of Christ; while another thrives in the community of a gay and lesbian protest church.

I seek a different direction of travel for queer sacramental theology since sacramental language which so reinforces the power and position of Church in human life is too often not resonant for me with the experience of, and quest for, human liberation for gay and lesbian people.

A queer understanding of the activity of God: Queer Liberation Theology

The theologian David Ford notes that improvisation around a theme is essential to living the Christian faith, which "is true to itself only by becoming freshly embodied in different contexts... Theologically understood, [such improvisations] are testimony to God's creativity and abundance... They show the particular activity of the Holy Spirit—a flourishing of distinctive and different realisations of the eventfulness of God." (Ford, 1999, p.144). Similarly, Marcella Althaus-Reid stretches our imaginative vision of God's "eventfulness" by seeing the living God in transgressive love experienced outside, as well as inside, the linguistic and social contexts of Church. Althaus-Reid seeks a radically queer and relational God, incarnate in every human life, who refuses to stand over against human bodies and stories in search of God. In this search, she disturbs the reader by using provocative language for God as faggot and whore (2000, p.96), as orgy and omnisexual deity (2003, p.53). She does this to provoke us to see that unless God is understood outside the constraints of human propriety and construction, God's otherness will always be negated. In my research findings, I identified this queer God in civil partnership rites where He/She was not permitted, officially, to be mentioned, yet who was named "secretly" by Christian worshippers not

permitted to have their relationships blessed in church. I glimpsed this queer God, too, in relationships which had flourished in faithful love outside the support of family, church and state.

A second reason for my unease over queer theologies which are almost entirely ecclesiastically framed is a suspicion that, while they form the basis for theological reflection, and are, as such, important, there is no sign that they create a basis for increased political awareness or action towards those who are both sexually and economically marginal. Rather than in the abstracted arguments of queer theory and theology, research participants had instead found liberation in the increased tolerance towards homosexuality in secular society, which had culminated in the demand for the legal recognition of same-sex partnerships. Their lives had been improved by the work of activists agitating and organising for greater social equality for lesbian and gay people over years. In this political process, and its results for them personally, they experienced the liberating activity of God.

In *Queering Theology* Isherwood and Althaus-Reid claim that queer theology is essentially about love (2004, p.2). Like the participants in this research, they are keen to explore how individuals and societies can act more lovingly. Just as love prompts questions about the morality of systems and language which receive theological sanction, so queer theology is of little use if it does not engage with the sexual and gender oppression of those, like my research participants, whose identities do not fit theologically approved patterns of relating (p.2). How do these queer liberation theologians avoid the trap of making of queer theology merely discursive on the one hand, or militantly exclusive in its opposition to certain phenomena on the other? Althaus-Reid suggests that queer theology proceed via a plethora of different political acts, rather than set up another line of binary opposition. In the queer liberation theology, I perceive in these research findings, participants act politically for justice and healing in society in multiple ways, locally, nationally and internationally, in ecology, in mental health, in theology, in family life, in church and in LGBTI activism. They do this in response to the energy and security they receive in relationships of transgressive love.

A queer understanding of the blessing of God

In chapter 11, I explored the ways in which my research participants interpret their relationships in the light of the theology of marriage. I suggest that by inhabiting the theology of marriage as same-sex couples, they “queer” the meanings of marriage in

highly visible ways. For example, the very language of marriage is queered since gay and lesbian partners cannot be husband and wife. Furthermore, gender roles and power differentiations are queered since in a same-sex partnership they must be determined in new, non-assumed ways. Finally, they also queer the meaning and means of procreation, and heteronormative assumptions about sex. Here, therefore, I want to suggest a way in which queer theology may throw new light on the meaning of God's blessing of their relationships. I do this to demonstrate one example of how the use of queer theology as a conceptual tool can help create an enriched theology of relationships.

In *The Relationship of Bodies*, the queer theologian David Matzo McCarthy asks how the intercourse of gay and lesbian bodies articulates the redemptive meaning of the body's agency (McCarthy, 2002, pp. 200–216). If heterosexual marriage is understood as an enactment of God's faithfulness and of the unity between Christ and the Church, and the means by which heterosexual bodies are taken into God's redemptive activity, how does this work for queer bodies in committed intimate relationships? McCarthy is not content to overlook sexuality and the sexual communication of the body in an overarching argument about mirroring God's faithfulness in relationship, important though that is, and as was apparent in the research findings. He is concerned that this emphasis circumvents the challenging question of difference between same-sex bodies which are moved by the desire for constancy of love. In what sense do same-sex couples receive their identity from, discover themselves in relation to, the embodied other?

For McCarthy, an understanding of sexual orientation is crucial to how we understand God's blessing in the sexual self-giving of same-sex couples one to another. He understands orientation to be a "confluence of physical, psychological and social movements that bring an individual into being as a person." (p.212). Just as men and women discover themselves through difference, so lesbians and gay men are "persons who encounter the other (and so discover themselves) in relation to persons of the same sex. This same-sex orientation is a given of their coming to be..." (p.213). God's blessing and reconciliation come to us, same-sex couples and heterosexual couples, as we come into ourselves through God.

I end with this further exploration of the understanding of God's blessing experienced in same-sex relationships since it is an example of the way in which queer theology opens doors into the layers of meaning in relationships such as those examined in this research, which fall outside the approved categories of heteronormative theology. Here, in this account of the redemptive quality of gay and lesbian sexual relationships,

there is borrowed from the Christian tradition the rich conceptual understanding of the discovery of the self in God through sexual self-giving to the other. There is also a new queering of that tradition as gay and lesbian people “come out” about their sexual desire for another in publicly communicative acts of loving commitment.

Something Old, Something New: Queer Theology in the process of becoming

In *Controversies in Queer Theology* Susannah Cornwall suggests, helpfully, that “queer theology is still negotiating what it might become, all the while going through the existential journey of asking whether it can ‘become’ anything at all, or whether that is too prescriptive and fixed for a resisting de-constructivist methodology.” (2011, p.247). I find it highly useful as a hermeneutical lens, prompting me to see God appearing in transgressive forms of love, to find God acting beyond the boundaries and language of the official Church. I therefore ultimately use it to critique and challenge those boundaries, so that queer voices and lives may be valued for the queer language and reality of God which they speak and enact. I believe that when permitted to flower in myriad practical forms, rather than creating one monolithic protesting stance, queer theology potentially has a subversive, liberative, and praxically useful contribution to make: it demands greater attention and exploration than is commonly afforded it by mainstream theology.

Eleven research participants do not use the word queer in relation to God or to themselves. However, they speak of a subversive love, experienced in their relationship of civil partnership, challenging heteronormative models of long-term committed relationship, in which they glimpse a God of love known more fully than before, who transforms them in the direction of worship and self-giving. Their narratives bear witness to a surprising, unexpected, liberative love, delivering them from loneliness and alienation. In this love, they glimpse God acting in their own queer lives, and in queer political history, delivering human beings from the pain of injustice, and calling them towards just action. They make practically useful contributions to our theological understanding of modern long-term committed and intimate relationships lived in a rapidly changing socio-political landscape. I identify these contributions in their honest descriptions of making home and family; of joining church and community; of experiencing difference and togetherness, without relinquishing equality; of understanding sexual attraction and sex in the context of long term commitment; and in their patience and anger when confronting oppressive practices. These are persons with queer histories and theologies to share.

Part V:
The End of the Research Journey

Chapter 13.

Conclusions: Footholds

In this chapter I summarise the research journey represented by this thesis, its conclusions and implications for myself as a person, priest-researcher, and theological educator, for the research participants and the Church of St. Martin-in-the-Fields, and for the wider Church of England. I examine the validity and the limitations of the research, and return to my original research question to ascertain whether and how far it has been answered.

The Research Journey

This journey began with an enquiry into concealment and silence, in the context of my experiences as a lesbian priest working in central London. I was intrigued to understand the power of religious taboo around the issue of homosexuality and what role theology may play in diminishing this destructive power in the lives of lesbian and gay people. This interest, pursued in the context of my work as an Anglican priest on the staff of St. Martin-in-the-Fields, and in the context of myself being in a civil partnership, provided my research question: *What meanings do gay and lesbian Christians, who are Anglicans attending the Church of St. Martin-in-the-Fields, give to their relationships of civil partnership?*

A search for theological meaning in the lives of gay and lesbian Christians in civil partnership would involve the use of a wide range of interpretative tools. Hermeneutical practical theology was identified as one important element in the conceptual framework of the research. It prompted me to discover how multi-layered is the meaning of phenomena. A second element was the theology of marriage. Just as many feminist theologians have critiqued hetero-patriarchal definitions of marriage, I would similarly become embroiled in a search for new theological perspectives on long-term committed gay and lesbian relationships. A third element in the conceptual framework was queer theology. By examining narratives of God, known in and through queer lives and relationships, I wished to supplement and subvert images of God, and of God's activity, in heteronormative theology.

In considering a methodology for this research, I was drawn to Denzin and Lincoln's description of qualitative research as "bricolage" or "montage" (2005, p.4). One of my aims was to add queer stories, queer layers, into the mix of the

heteronormative narratives of Bible, Church and Church Tradition in order to reveal what is “normal” and “abnormal” in new ways.

The research was conducted in the context of St. Martin-in-the-Fields using interviews, questionnaires, the writing of detailed transcripts, as well as participant review and feedback sessions. In a thematic analysis of the verbatim reports, I identified three overarching themes in research participants’ descriptions of the meaning for them of their rites and relationships of civil partnership. First, participants emphasised the transformative effects of the public affirmation of a private reality. Second, they had experienced the rites and relationships of civil partnership as a profound homecoming from wilderness. Third, for almost all participants these rites and relationships were understood relationally as marriage. A smaller yet important theme, the effect of the research process on the researcher, became integrated into the reflections of each interpretative chapter as the research journey developed.

Having established my findings, I turned to their interpretation. In Chapter 9, “Outward and Visible Sign: The Public Affirmation of a Private Reality,” I discussed how twelve research participants suggested that the rites and relationships of civil partnership point to divine reality. I interpreted their words to propose that they described the rite and the relationship in queer sacramental terms, since God was known here in the bodies, actions and words of “transgressive love.”

In Chapter 10, “From Wilderness to Homecoming: Stories of Liberation,” I traced narratives of liberation. The sacred/secular binary understanding of reality was challenged as participants experienced a God working in political history, in their personal lives, and in the history of gay and lesbian liberation. I interpreted this God of liberation to be queer, gathering to the table of family, social and church celebrations those who were once, politely or violently, left outside.

In Chapter 11, “Enduring Love: Is this Marriage or Not?” I discovered that civil partnership meant marriage in a relational sense to all but two of the research participants. However, by marrying, these participants “queered” marriage, subverting traditionally understood language and gender roles in marriage, the purpose and place of sex, and the meanings of procreativity. I considered that a queer subversive God was evident in the mutual desire of same-sex partners one for another, in the challenge they experienced to love the difference of the other, in their creation of fresh shapes of family, and in the ways in which the presence of these relationships queered Church, society and previous forms of marriage.

Conclusions

The conclusions I now reach at the end of this research journey are these:

1. Civil partnership was an appropriate subject to choose to investigate the power of the religious taboo around homosexuality and to explore the means by which that power is gradually diminished in individuals and in society. One finding of the research was that, for these participants, civil partnership strengthened the identity of the self, clarified the nature of the relationship to families, friends and colleagues, and created the opportunity for wide public affirmation.
2. There are theologies that support this diminishment of the power of taboo. The first is sacramental theology, which glimpses God's presence in all human life and which understands human love to be a visible sign of the invisible grace of God. In gay and lesbian sexual desire, it is possible to see not sin but a sign of God's desire for us. Queer theology reminds us how wide and "scandalous" is God's desire: "Our search is for theological interchanges of intimacy, sexual identities and politics in the dark alleys behind our churches; the search for God in dark alleys." (Althaus-Reid, 2003, p.34).
3. Another theology diminishing the power of religious taboo surrounding homosexuality is liberation theology. A conclusion of this research is that God liberates outside the forms and hierarchies of official church structures and statements, and that gay and lesbian Christians must take responsibility to know and possess their own experience of God. This experience of God does not require, although it may, the leaving behind of Church community and belonging. On the contrary Althaus-Reid suggests that as "resident aliens within the system" we may, by telling our stories and living our lives, queer the institutions to which we belong: "The powerful theological praxis of transformation usually comes from the direction of aliens working within the system." (Althaus-Reid, 2003, p.30).
4. A third is a queer theology of marriage. A queer theology of adult relating in marriage suggests the presence and pattern of a God who in relating is beyond binary gender identifications, beyond paternal and maternal imagery, yet who takes up home with us, chooses to be identified with us, God's queer people, and remains faithful to us in providing an abundance of love for us to share.
5. The power of taboo is also experienced by Christians who are afraid of conceptualising gay and lesbian sexual experience as God-given, let alone grace-filled, or sacramental, or part of God's liberation of human beings from

loneliness. Compassion and patience are therefore needed to understand their fear and foreboding over the sexual revolution taking place around them. However, such patience and compassion should not blind the leadership of the Church of England to the harm perpetuated by religious taboos surrounding homosexuality. These research findings suggest that the power of taboo damages self-esteem, divides families, limits the understanding within church communities of the pastoral needs and theological strengths of gay and lesbian members, narrows interpretations of the face of God, and, most seriously of all, provides motivation for homophobic abuse and cruelty.

6. It is in the light of the pressing need to diminish the strength of religious taboo still surrounding homosexuality, that I now understand the importance of same-sex marriage and of challenging the resistance to this within the Church of England. For where there is inequality of esteem, or the continued creation of an “abnormal group”, or the barring of people from belonging within a particular religious tradition because they are in some way different, there spaces are provided for the continuance of the power of taboo.
7. Qualitative research as “bricolage” or “montage” resonates with my finding layers of queer theology, sacramental theology, liberation theology and marriage theology in the narratives of these research participants, without experiencing the need to conflate these into one coherent theology of civil partnership. I had imagined finding lasting places to stand for gay and lesbian Christians exploring the meaning of their long-term committed intimate relationships. Instead I have found firm footholds which fit some feet, not others. Gay and lesbian Christians are sustained in their journeys in relationship by theologies as varied as they are themselves.
8. In this sense of resisting smooth definitions and conflations of meaning, I assert that layers of queer theology are found in these narratives. It is true that there is no substantial critique of essentialist views of sexuality and gender here. It is also true that there appears to be little questioning of whether marriage is an institution worth entering, and strangely little criticism of the “marriage industry”. However, for me it is important not to be fundamentalist about the definition of “queer theology”: here are gay and lesbian Christians questioning heteronormative patterns and language of Bible, Church, God and relationships from a theological point of view.
9. The language of “queer”, however, needs to be handled with care in the

circumstances in which I live and work. In liaising further with the research participants, with the Church of St. Martin-in-the-Fields, and the wider Church of England, I may choose not to use it. I have been struggling to understand why, but now do understand. By its forcible challenge and critique of heteronormative language of God and relationships, it may engender fear of taboo and therefore decrease the possibility of useful conversation and debate. “Queer” theory and theology provide the language I choose to use, but I do not choose to use it where it may stir fear and aggression in others. I use it as one layer within theology, which for me provides devastating, meaningful, liberating and playful critique of the whole.

10. Finally, liturgy helps recreate the people of God. It is the creative space for hearing the continuing story of the Word of God lived in the contemporary world. Where the Church of England planned for there to be no liturgy, in civil partnership ceremonies held in town halls, registry offices and hotels, these gay and lesbian Christians created liturgies to recreate themselves as the people of God. In church services, which, according to the official statements of the Church of England, could be neither blessings nor marriages, they recreated themselves as the people of God. The research findings show that God is neither silenced, nor displaced, nor un-named, where God chooses to be. In these research participants’ voices, there is evidence of a God who chooses to be known and addressed outside heteronormative patterns of living in relationship.

Implications and Outcomes

I address here the implications and outcomes of the research process for myself, for the research participants and the Church of St. Martin-in-the-Fields, and for the wider Church of England.

My own journey

There are outcomes of this research journey for myself as person, as priest-researcher, and as tutor in practical theology at an Anglican theological college.

Reading feminist and queer theology has freed me to be less interested in finding answers to questions about what gay and lesbian Christians may or may not be permitted to do or say by the official leadership of the Church of England. Instead I have become aware that fleeting theological footholds may be all that are available in a rapidly changing socio-political landscape for gay and lesbian people, but to be confident that new footholds—not even visible to feminist and queer theology—will

appear as God acts. I understand myself as part of what Alison calls “the gay thing”, as he describes, “We find ourselves relating, whether we want to or not, with each other, and with ourselves, in new ways, as a result of something which is far bigger than any of us and which is just happening.” (2007, p.51). My task is to own that awareness of my identity, and to attend to where God may speak to me in art, in society, in theology, and in the lives of others.

Another outcome, however, is to have glimpsed the depths of personhood at which taboos undermine self-confidence and the capacity to think as an independent enquirer. I have understood it to be also a stubbornly powerful inner dynamic within myself. This painful discovery remains alive for me with the issue of where and when to use the word “queer” in the presentation of my research. How to become a practical theologian able to use the language of “queer” without encasing it in the “elite gossip” of ecclesial theology (Althaus-Reid, 2003, p.49) to soften its impact, remains a question for me.

I was both priest and researcher in my own congregation through the main interactive years of this research. As a priest known to all the research participants, I gained trust quickly, so that interviews yielded rich descriptions of civil partnership. However, as I complete the research process, I make my own interpretation of what others have said, so that their stories in one sense become mine, shaped by my own experiences, needs and thoughts. I am particularly aware of a dilemma around the use of the word “queer” which was not used by eleven participants, but which I use frequently in my interpretation of the data. I need to be clear in presentations of the material what is my own interpretation of their narratives, and to learn to present material as a pastoral priest in context, who is yet not afraid to present disturbing or challenging research findings.

As a practical theologian working for the Church of England the outcomes of the research journey so far have been twofold. First, when invited I have given talks to a wide variety of audiences about the research journey¹¹, as well as to peers in the Centre

¹¹ Talks include: “Being Biblical, Being Gay” (2010 at St. Martin-in-the-Fields); “Compassion and Protest” (2011 at St. Martin-in-the-Fields); “The Cuthman Lecture” (2012 at Penfold Hall, Steyning); “Sexuality and Human Flourishing” (2013, day conference at All Saints, Birmingham); also Workshops: “To Have and to Hold” (2014 at Inclusive Church Day Conference at St John’s Waterloo); “The Use of Art in Spiritual Direction” (2014 at London Spirituality Centre); “The Family in Theological Perspectives: Challenges, Insights and Dialogues” (2015 at the Digby Stuart Research Centre for Religion, Society and Human Flourishing, Roehampton University).

for the Study of Christianity and Sexuality¹². Second, I have taken a stand against the perpetuation of silence around human sexuality in general, and homosexuality in particular, in my role as tutor in Practical Theology and Mission at St. Augustine's College, and have ensured that students gain the opportunity to discuss queer theology when they study hermeneutics.

It has been a serious shock for me to rediscover among ordinands an atmosphere of taboo around homosexuality after enjoying the freedom for self-expression I found eventually in my life at St. Anne's in Soho, and in my second post at St. Martin-in-the-Fields. It has been a salutary reminder to me of the importance of this research. Consequently, I have worked with the Theological Educators Group of the Centre for the Study of Christianity and Sexuality on two occasions¹³ to open the discussion of such issues in the theological colleges and courses of the Church of England.

The Church of St. Martin-in-the-Fields

I have presented my research findings on three occasions so far at St. Martin-in-the-Fields: to the Vicar in a private meeting; to a research participants' reflection group; and to the Parochial Church Council. In each of these meetings it has been understood by all concerned that the research process was not yet ended, and that future discussion of the research may be useful for improving the congregation's understanding of issues surrounding the welcome of gay and lesbian people at St. Martin's and in the wider Church of England. Two of these meetings, the first and the third, were both information-giving and permission-seeking to create further opportunities for such discussion. The second was to hear participants' reflections on the research findings and to seek their views about recommendations to make to the PCC about future action to take at St. Martin's in the light of the research.

Since Sam Wells is both the incumbent of St. Martin-in-the-Fields and an academic, accustomed to reading doctoral theses, I sent him a long summary of my thesis, giving emphasis to the role St. Martin-in-the-Fields has played in the lives of the research participants in terms of its inclusive welcome, its liturgy, theology and education programme, and its warm community life.

¹² The Centre for the Study of Christianity and Sexuality is a charity that provides opportunities for sexuality to be discussed honestly and openly, and aims to help others in the churches to provide similar opportunities: <http://christianityandsexuality.org/>

¹³ "Embodied Ministry: Gender, Sexuality and Formation" (July 2014, Ripon College, Cuddesdon) and "Constructive Conversations: Workshops for Theological Educators on Classroom Strategies around Gender and Sexuality" (June 2016, Manchester and London).

We discussed these issues:

- A possible presentation of the research findings to the PCC;
- Given the transformative value of services of dedication and thanksgiving following civil partnership described by research participants who had requested these, is it sufficiently clearly advertised that such services are available at St. Martin-in-the-Fields?
- Finding a forum for the discussion of theological ideas about God known in relationship;
- Finding a forum for the lesbian and gay members of St. Martin's to understand the theological and ecclesiological motivation of official church statements about civil partnership and equal same-sex marriage and their own theology about these issues;
- How do we "live resurrection" while we wait for homosexuality to be better understood and accepted by the Christian Church in general, and the Church of England in particular? What sort of theological undergirding and practical shape do we give to that living resurrection as the Church of St. Martin-in-the-Fields?

Sam gave permission for there to be a discussion of the research at the PCC and agreed that we find ways to discuss the theological and practical issues raised by the research in the appropriate forums of the wider church.

I am less satisfied with the process and results of the participants' reflection group. In this group, I felt driven both to present my whole research and to arrive at recommendations for future action because I had been invited to present the research to the PCC the day after. These two features of the way I decided to work in the group prevented free discussion of the theology included in research outcomes. More positively, participants suggested that being involved in the interviews had given them the space and prompting to reflect on issues and that this reflection had continued for them after the research process was over. Overall, I left the presentation with the sense that there is considerable theological reflection to ponder, both for the research participants and for others, in these research results.

The following evening, I gave a shorter, more concise presentation to the PCC. While they welcomed the presentation, and invited me to find opportunities for a fuller discussion once the research is completed, I again felt that I had not taken into account dynamics caused by the challenging nature of some findings, my use of the word "queer", and by the list of recommendations at the end of the presentation. The questions at the participants' reflection group for discussion by the PCC were these:

- Who is St. Martin-in-the-Fields for? Is it as much for those who feel outside and excluded as it is for those who find it welcoming and life-giving and who therefore stay? If it is for those others, **how to attract them rather than create barriers? Are the words lesbian and gay used at all on the website?**
- If the warm welcome of St. Martin's so helps gay and lesbian people to find themselves at home here, and then at home in God's story, **should some of their stories of civil partnership perhaps be on the website as part of the "stories group" project?**
- Would it be possible for St. Martin's to advertise more clearly on its website the availability of services of prayer and dedication following civil partnership / same-sex marriage, with the PCC policy about this? (N.B.: only men have, so far, felt able to ask; asking was very difficult unless those requesting had been here for a very long time or had a close relationship already with a staff member; one gay couple stated it had been very difficult to summon the courage to ask.)
- **Contemplative service** incorporating these themes (sometimes lament is needed) and /or further discussion of the themes in a larger event with the research participants and others once the thesis is in readable form.

The discussion following the presentation was challenging for me. Sharp differences of opinion appeared to erupt around the issue of the use of the word "blessing", mentioned by a priest colleague who had conducted liturgies of thanksgiving yet who knew that they are not very clearly advertised as available at St. Martin's, and about greater clarity on the website about welcome to gay and lesbian people. To ease a difficult discussion, and to give resolution around the recommendations, the vicar was turned to as an authority figure. I became at first tongue-tied, and then suffered feelings of abandonment, while he, I suspect, felt wrong-footed by the request for authoritative decision-making to be made quickly around such sensitive issues. I was particularly horrified when the issue arose of what constitutes "balanced numbers" of lesbian and gay Christians at St. Martin's. In other words, the sense of danger surrounding a taboo subject was palpable in the room. Permission for future discussion was rescued as a fruitful outcome of the evening.

I have learnt from these two discussions to give considerable thought to creating safe circumstances for pondering these research outcomes in the future. I realise that I found it very difficult to change from being empathic priest interviewer/researcher and writer, working with one utterly sympathetic interviewee, to be a challenging lone presenter. Who presents this research, and how it is best presented, and to whom, will

become part of serious reflection in the future. It is easy to forget that taboo exerts its effects all the way around the discussion table.

Disturbing though these events were, two positive results are that both participants and PCC members wish to read the completed thesis, and that the research is tabled to be on the agenda of St. Martin's over the next year, whether as part of a small theology group's discussions, or as a presentation to the whole congregation after church, or both.

The Church of England

There are two implications for this research for the wider Church. The first concerns the Listening Process, and the second the consideration of experience as one essential ingredient in the creation of a living theology. Within this second consideration, I reflect on possible opposing theological positions to my own.

Since this research process began, the Church of England has vastly improved the organisation of its listening process, which is the process by which gay and lesbian voices are heard by both ordinary congregational, and General Synod, members of the Church of England. At first the process appeared arbitrary, and intended not to disturb the status quo, by being kept secret and in the possession of one individual paid to act as a go-between between those gay and lesbian people selected by him to be heard and the House of Bishops. Six years later the Archbishop of Canterbury has employed a priest highly skilled and experienced in conflict resolution to set up a process in all the dioceses of the Church of England, facilitated by trained mediators, to hear the views of people concerning issues in human sexuality. Bishops have certainly selected those group members, but in some dioceses (like my own) an open advert invited people to apply for places if they wished to be considered. Deciding not to apply, I was nevertheless empowered by this second process because I had choice about becoming part of the process or not. Again, in the General Synod, the governing body of the Church of England, carefully facilitated, confidential listening processes have taken place around these issues this summer. The processes to create approximations to Habermas's "ideal speech situations" (1990, p.89) and McCord Adams' "taboo-free zones" (1996, 2005) have been attempted in order for there to be listening without premature judgement or censure. This research has helped me to understand the terrible power of taboo, within myself and in other lives, to injure and oppress. Creating such safe listening spaces is one step towards diminishing its power.

This research seeks theological meaning in the language gay and lesbian

Christians use to describe their experience of civil partnership. The analysis of experience, or rather of language about experience, is a core element of these research findings. George Schnier in “The Appeal to Experience” (1992, in Rogers, 2002) suggests we approach the use of experience with care in the construction of theology. Since it is a multi-layered construction, derived from the experiences of myriad others, it cannot be used truthfully and responsibly in defence of an unmoveable position, as a final authority, or un-revisable. Nevertheless, Schnier writes, experience in the sense of awareness of the agency of the transcendent, has a vital function in Christian theology. It provides a doorway into the past so that we rediscover the wisdom gained in resolving past problems of a similar nature. It provides a window into the future, permitting Christian theology to move forwards into new territory. Schnier explains how, in Christianity, community and tradition act as a medium in which the experience of the transcendent can appear. He concludes that creating a balance in theology between the appeal to philosophy, scripture and experience is important.

The Anglican Church, in its official forms, despite its history of insisting on the importance of combining insights from Bible, the tradition of the Church, and reason or “conscience”, appears to be unable to recognise the experience of the transcendent in the bodily life of gay and lesbian people, even where those people themselves admit the importance of searching and using Scripture and Church tradition to understand and articulate the meanings of their experience. It has demonstrated this lack of recognition by its disapproval of sexual relations as an important element in relationships of civil partnership, and in refusing to countenance same-sex marriage as a crucible in which gay and lesbian couples may grow in holiness of life and love. On what theological arguments does this opposition rest?

In Chapter 12, I reflected on opposing elements within queer theology, and where I place my research within those opposing ideas. Here it is important to reflect on more traditional theological arguments against my interpretation of my research findings, although it is beyond the scope of this thesis to undertake a comprehensive analysis of the multiple theological positions in opposition. I do however need to consider the role of experience in theology. Key arguments, based on Church tradition, biblical authority and natural law understanding of gender and sexuality can be summarised in the following way. These relationships cannot partake of sacramental reality, because the definition of sacraments lies within the authority of the Church to decide. They cannot participate in God’s liberating action in the world, since the Bible clearly demonstrates that same-sex relationships are contrary to God’s will for human beings. They cannot be

likened to marriage, since marriage, by definition, must, as ordained by God, be between a man and a woman.

These arguments deserve to be taken seriously since they rest on the use of the traditional sources for Christian sexual ethics. However, at their heart lies an assumption that particular strands of Church tradition, biblical theology and the understanding of gender and sexuality cannot be balanced, let alone overturned, by personal experience, no matter how compelling or poignant accounts of personal experience may be. My research however rests on valuing research participants' experience and my interpretations of this.

While recognising that the appeal to experience may become “disproportionately preoccupying and autocratic”, Schnier warns that, equally, “the theologian who neglects the appeal to experience does so at great peril.” (Schnier, 1992). Three areas of human experience are, in my view, neglected in these opposite arguments. First, pain of body and spirit forces us to think in new ways about sexual orientation and gender roles. What was assumed to be based in nature, in the given-ness of anatomy and physiology, and what was unquestioned, considered benign, in gendered divisions of labour, has been challenged by feminists and womanists suffering a painful lack of self-determining freedom to grow, to exert influence, even to protect the self from violence. Second, just as every secular discipline requires careful examination and interpretation, so do texts of the Bible and the writings of Church tradition. The cultures represented in the Bible and the traditions of the Church were neither stable nor monolithic. Cultural and social forces shaped our sexual desires, and therefore writings about those desires then, as now. Farley, with other feminists, asks what is the “usable past” in the Christian tradition? (2010, p.187). Third, at the heart of Christianity lies the awareness of God’s justice and God’s love, revealed in the person, words and work of Jesus. Since Jesus’s summary of the religious tradition which he inherited stressed love of God, love of self, and love of neighbour, God’s righteousness appears to call us to an inward wholeness of love, which extends to neighbours near and far. This orientation towards God involves the recognition that our judgements have the capacity for harm as well as healing of our neighbour, and that in the creation of sexual ethics it is important not to neglect justice. In Margaret Farley’s work, “Just Love: a framework for Christian sexual ethics” (2010, pp.185–186), mentioned above, and more fully in Chapter 10, she proposes, in a way very pertinent to the findings of this research, that we move away from a framework for sexual ethics based on the fear of taboo, an ethics of defilement and guilt, and towards an ethic based on justice. My research findings show how great a potential for healing

such an ethic has, which is based on justice towards gay and lesbian people.

The limitations of this research, and a return to the research question

This is a small research project, narrowly focused on the congregation of St. Martin-in-the-Fields in central London, and, even more specifically, on a group of thirteen lesbian and gay people who attended there regularly around a date in 2012 when my D.Prof. research proposal was accepted by Anglia Ruskin University. The validity of the conclusions I draw lies, therefore, not in its contents being generalizable in any sense, but in possible resonances formed between its content, my interpretations and conclusions and the experience of interested parties who read or hear about the research in the future. The research findings are verifiable inasmuch as robust research methods were used in: the selection and interviews of research participants; writing detailed verbatim accounts of interviews; having those accounts reviewed for accuracy by the participants; and receiving feedback from participants concerning the research findings at a participants' reflection group. Nevertheless, the interpretation remains mine, constructed over time by reflection on my own experience, by reading, in supervision, and through the writing of a research diary to help me discern my own reactions to participants' narratives and feedback. While small in scope, I hope by the research to have created a thick, rich description of gay and lesbian lives, lived in the context of Anglican Church belonging in the West End of London in a narrow moment of history, when the social experiment of civil partnership was still very new, yet also about to become out-dated in the rush for equal marriage to be legalised.

In my research question, I asked what meanings gay and lesbian Christians, who were Anglicans attending St. Martin-in-the-Fields, gave to their relationships of civil partnership. I sought footholds in theology to provide a guide for myself, and to provoke discussion in others, about the theological meanings of civil partnership. At this final stage of the research process, I find a rich collage of meanings. In the research, I have identified in accounts of gay and lesbian love a queer theology, which is, in its breadth, personal and political, mystical and practical, and resonant with both past and present Christian meaning. I seize it as a broad stepping stone for the continuing journey.

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Appendix A: St. Martin-in-the-Fields Policy Guidelines for services of prayer following Civil Partnership

A Service of Prayer and Dedication after a Civil Partnership.

Arrangements for St Martin-in-the-Fields were agreed unanimously by the PCC 27th March 2006 and reported to the Annual Parochial Church Meeting 30th April 2006. This information is for the congregations.

In December 2005 a new law came into effect making it possible for same sex couples to contract a Civil Partnership. This is a contentious matter within the Anglican Communion. Members of St Martin's hold a variety of views whilst our church policy has been consistently inclusive and affirming of all people regardless of their sexual orientation.

In keeping with our overall approach to 'Liturgies for Life' (copies of which are available in church), the PCC agree that there may be circumstances in which 'A Service of Prayer and Dedication after a Civil Partnership' would be appropriate at St Martin's. As yet, no such service has been authorised by the Church of England. A service would therefore be 'tailor-made' for each occasion and have no official standing other than as a parochial and pastoral response to the needs of the St Martin's community.

A Service of Prayer and Dedication after a Civil Partnership at St Martin's would take place under the following circumstances:

- when the couple are part of the St Martin's community or have a strong pastoral relationship with us.
- when the couple are committed to a loving, faithful and lifelong partnership.
- when there are good reasons and a clear desire on the part of the couple for a church service following the contracting of a Civil Partnership.
- after pastoral discussion and preparation with the couple by one of the clergy.
- with the agreement of the Vicar.

Such a service would primarily be a pastoral occasion. It could be expected to be a joyful and public celebration of a committed relationship but it should not become a vehicle for publicity-seeking or campaigning.

The proposed title of this service mirrors the Church of England's provision for those seeking a church service following a Civil Marriage. It could be expected that the service would include covenantal promises made by the couple to each other in front of witnesses, as well as prayers to strengthen and support the couple in upholding their resolve and commitment.

Given that this service will only be available to members of the St Martin's community it is not subject to the Church of England's statutory fees. There is no charge for anything currently done under 'Liturgies for Life' at St Martin's. It is therefore proposed that no church fee is charged for a Service of Prayer and Dedication after a Civil Partnership. The couple might choose to make a thank offering. However, a Minister's fee would be charged and assigned to the Diocese, the same as for any special service at St Martin's. Any costs, such as music, bells, flowers etc, would be on the same scale as for any special service at St Martin's.

The Bishop of London has been informed of our decision.

Appendix B: St. Martin-in-the-Fields Mission Action Plan and Parish survey re LGBT membership



St Martin-in-the-Fields Mission Action Plan

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Mission Statement

St Martin-in-the-Fields exists to honour God by being an open and inclusive church that enables people to question and discover for themselves the significance of Jesus Christ.

Introduction

St Martin-in-the-Fields is a welcoming, hospitable and vibrant community with worship at its heart. We are made up of English and Chinese speaking congregations, St Martin-in-the-Fields Limited (the company which manages our concerts, café, conference facilities, meeting spaces and shop), and a number of charitable bodies including The Connection at St Martin's and the Chinese People's Day Centre,. The church has a history and vocation of care for all who cross our threshold.

We are an open and inclusive church and, in consequence, a diverse community. In celebrating the historic breadth and generosity of Christianity in the Anglican Church we strive to be a place where the diversity of Christian understanding can flourish. The gift of God's Holy Spirit is the gift of loving communion and unity between those who speak different languages. We seek to rediscover and celebrate the dynamic of faithful difference in our following Jesus Christ so that we can witness with authority and integrity to the love of Christ in the world.

While celebrating and defending our unity in the body of Christ, the living Word requires us to work together to understand God's purposes in the 21st century. As a community we are used to accepting paradox creatively. Our aim is not to provide simple answers but to uphold one another in living with the questions, to seek the deeper truths, and to be a place of encounter between people and God.

Having recently completed the renewal of our buildings, we are experiencing a time of growth and opportunity. As we explore ways to sustain and enhance our life together, we wish to continue to extend the welcome and hospitality of St Martin's by serving a wider community and deepening our commitment to London and the global community to which we belong.

These are the issues which will inform our priorities over the next three years.

2. Expressing inclusiveness and welcome

2.1 Developing the theology, and communicating the nature, of an inclusive Church

We are committed to an inclusive vision of the Kingdom of God where all are welcome, irrespective of the elements that make up the range of human diversity including age, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation and ability. Our theological understanding informs this view and we are conscious of the need for materials to communicate this. We will build upon the work that has already been done through our Education programme and such initiatives as the 'Living the Questions' course and will prioritise inclusive liturgy.

Actions: *a) To devise liturgy, events, courses, and literature which develop and communicate inclusive theology.*

b) We will work to engage with the debates of the wider Anglican Communion.

2.2 Visitors

With some 700,000 visitors a year, St Martin's is one of London's top twenty most visited attractions.

Our visitors expect a range of high quality and accessible interpretative material. We have an excellent Audio Guide and Malcolm Johnson's History of St Martin's. We need to produce a Guide Book. The displays and interpretation material in the foyer need to be regularly refreshed.

Action: *We will work in consultation with St Martin-in-the-Fields Limited, to distribute the Audio Guide and the History of St Martin's in a more active way, and to produce a Guide Book.*

2.3 Dialogue with other faiths

London is the most cosmopolitan city on earth, a 'world in a city'. As such we have unique opportunities to engage with people of other faiths. Peaceful religious dialogue is vital when many of the world's conflicts are fuelled by toxic religion.

We expect this engagement also to find expression in the pursuit of justice through local social action, as the diverse communities that make up this city seek to find their own voice.

Actions: *a) We will engage with people of other faiths, and identify like-minded partners to work with.*

b) To work in common cause with members of other faiths in pursuit of justice through local social action, continuing to explore our role with London Citizens and thereafter reviewing our membership annually.

2.4 Olympics

One of the reasons London won the 2012 Olympics is because the most cosmopolitan city on earth is also one of the most comfortable with its diversity. In religious terms we will want our Olympic visitors to experience St Martin's at its best, so the quality of the church's and SMITFL's programming for the period of the Olympics and Paralympics will be important in what is usually the summer holiday period in the church's year.

By exhibiting our links with other faith communities in music and stories, prayer and fellowship, we look forward to showing the possibilities of our inhabiting one city together.

Actions: *a) We will form a working party at the earliest possible date to plan and implement a programme of events including liturgy and education which will reflect on national identity, diversity and the world community during the Olympics and Paralympics.*

b) In planning our events we liaise with More Than Gold (the umbrella churches organisation for the Olympics), Festival 2012, and others.

c) We will use our international connections to link especially with those countries that are smaller and less likely to win medals.

d) We will work with other faith communities and like-minded partners to witness to the faith communities working in harmony.

2.5 Developing the ministry to asylum seekers, migrants and homeless people.

St Martin's recognizes that an essential part of inclusiveness is to continue to develop our welcome and ministry towards those people who are homeless and come into St. Martin's seeking the warmth and peace of this church. This ministry especially at this time includes those who are seeking asylum in this country or are migrants who have newly arrived. St. Martin's recognizes the spiritual as well as the physical needs of those who are most vulnerable and seeks to develop this ministry.

Action: *Alongside the day to day ministry to those who come into St Martin's simply to sit and seek space and sanctuary, we will work with The Connection, its volunteers and Friends, and other like-minded organisations to meet the spiritual needs of asylum seekers and refugees and homeless people.*

St Martin-in-the-Fields Parish Survey

23) Please select the option which best describes your sexuality:

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Lesbian/Gay	11.4%	21
Bisexual	3.2%	6
Heterosexual	81.1%	150
I do not wish to disclose my sexual orientation	4.3%	8
<i>answered question</i>		185
<i>skipped question</i>		19

Please select the option which best describes your sexuality:



- ☐ Lesbian/Gay
- ☐ Bisexual
- ☐ Heterosexual
- ☐ I do not wish to disclose my sexual orientation

Appendix C: Letter to *The Times* newspaper, 2 February 2012

We, the undersigned, believe that on the issue of holding civil partnership ceremonies in Church of England churches incumbents / priests in charge should be accorded the same rights as they enjoy at present in the matter of officiating at the marriage of divorced couples in church. Namely, that this should be a matter for the individual conscience of the incumbent / priest in charge.

We would respectfully request that our views in this regard are fully represented in Synod.

Rev. Preb. Brian Leathard, Rev. Dr. Jack Dunn

St. Luke's with Christ Church, Chelsea, London, SW3

The Rt. Rev. Edward Holland

Hon. Assistant Bishop in London and Europe

The Rev. Canon Mark Oakley

Canon Treasurer, St. Paul's Cathedral, London, EC4

The Rev. Canon. Dr. Giles Fraser

Former Canon Chancellor, St. Paul's Cathedral, London, EC4

Rev. Lucy Winkett, Rev. Lindsay Meader, Rev. Hugh Valentine

St. James's, Piccadilly, London, W1

Rev. Canon. Joe Hawes, Rev. Penny Seabrook, Rev. Eileen McGregor

All Saints, Fulham, SW6

Rev. Gillean Craig

St. Mary Abbots, Kensington, W8

Rev. Ginny Thomas

St. Mary with St. Peter and St. Jude, West Brompton, SW10

Rev. Stephen Dando, Rev. Elaine Dando

St. Lawrence Church, Eastcote, Pinner, London, HA5

Rev. Preb. Ron Swan

PTO Diocese of London

Rev. Preb. Michael Shrewsbury
 Prebendary Emeritus of St. Paul's Cathedral, London, EC4

Rev. Philippa Turner
 Chaplain, Royal Veterinary College, London, NW1 and UCL Medical
 London, London, WC1

Rev. Philip Davison
 St. Mary, Finchley, London, N3

Rev. Tim Gosden
 St. Mary, Harrow On The Hill, London, HA1

Rev. Preb. Guy Pope
 St. Mary, Brookfield, London, NW5

Rev. Tim Ditchfield
 Chaplain, King's College, London, WC2

Rev. Andrew J. Keep
 PTO Diocese of London

Rev. Raymond Ramsden
 St. Stephen, Hounslow, London, TW3

Rev. Ros Trafford-Roberts
 PTO Diocese of London

Rev. Jonathan Barker
 Chaplain, St. Pancras International Station and King's Cross Station, London, N1

Rev. Richard Carter, Rev. Katherine Hedderly, Rev. William Morris,
 Rev. Clare Herbert, Rev. Rosy Fairhurst

St. Martin-In-The-Fields, London, WC2

Rev. Gavin Williams
 Chaplain, Westminster School, London, SW1

Appendix D: Pastoral response of St. Martin-in-the-Fields

16 June 2014

APPENDIX D

Pastoral Response to use in conversation with the parish office re services of thanksgiving and prayer for LGBT people who are either in a Civil Partnership or marriage.

St Martin's clergy are, with the permission of the Vicar, very happy to enter into services of thanksgiving and prayer for LGBT people who are either in Civil partnership or marriage. But their position on this is precisely the same as it is for heterosexual couples. Couples need either to live in the parish of St Martin's or to belong to the Church congregation. Belonging is expressed by worshipping with us for at least 6 months and thereafter signing what is called the Electoral Roll.

We do this because St Martin's, while it is famously very inclusive, is also part of the ordinary parochial system of any Church of England Parish Church. Simply put, this means we don't pinch pastoral work from other parishes! Unless people already worship here they should turn to their own parish church first for help.

If you would like to belong here, and know that you can worship here regularly, please come to a service and speak to a member of the clergy about your hopes. You will be most welcome to join us and we will do all we can to help.

See statement below re Same Sex Marriage from Sam Wells, Vicar of St Martin's.

St Martin-in-the-Fields and Same-Sex Marriage

St Martin-in-the-Fields is a Church of England parish church. Its vicar has responsibility for the spiritual care of all who live within the parish boundaries. It works with all other Church of England parish churches to seek to be a blessing to all the people of this land.

The marriage regulations in this country state that those who dwell within the parish boundaries, and are not currently married, have not been previously married, and are 16 years old or over, are entitled to be married in their parish church. We at St Martin's are, accordingly, glad to make arrangements with them. In addition, we are also in the habit of marrying those who are frequent worshippers here and are on the electoral roll, and, in appropriate circumstances, those seeking a further marriage after divorce.

Since the introduction of civil partnerships for same-sex couples St Martin's has, like a number of other churches, out of concern for appropriate pastoral care for members of its congregation, hosted services of prayer and dedication after a civil ceremony for couples who meet the same criteria as those for marriage – i.e. either residence in the parish or membership of the electoral roll. These have been tender and moving occasions for the couple, their family and friends; wide publicity, for the purposes of campaigning, has not been encouraged.

The legislation for same-sex marriage explicitly precludes a wedding in a Church of England church. Nonetheless, St Martin's is open for same-sex couples to have a service of prayer and dedication after a civil ceremony very much along the lines of that which has followed a civil partnership hitherto. Again, these ceremonies are available to those who either live in the parish or are members of the electoral roll.

Sam Wells
Vicar

Appendix E: Initial letter to participants

27th September 2013

Dear _____,

I am writing to ask for your help with my doctoral thesis called "Something Borrowed, Something New". I am presently studying for a Professional Doctorate in Practical Theology with the above university. My aim is to analyse the language Christians who are gay and lesbian, and who attend St. Martin's, whether from time to time or regularly, use to describe their Civil Partnership. The long-term goal is to voice the meanings they give in present debates, both at St. Martin's and in the wider Church, albeit of course anonymously. I write to ask your permission to interview you.

The process would be the following, if you would kindly agree

1. That we phone each other or meet for me to explain the research to you with its ethical safeguards and purpose
2. That I record a fairly long semi structured interview with you, lasting about 90 mins. I hope that we may use your home or an informal room at St. Martin's for this. At the end of the recording I shall check for gaps you have noticed or questions you have.
3. I will send you the transcript of this interview for you to check for accuracy within the following month. Please change anything inaccurate or tell me to delete anything at all which worries you in this transcript since it will be quoted anonymously in my findings and analysis.
4. When the work is substantially complete I shall draw participants willing to meet into a focus group to discuss the findings. That group's work will not be recorded orally but careful notes will be drawn up of the main issues of debate, again for use in the thesis. A list of these points will be sent to you to check for accuracy and further reflections from you.
5. When the written work is complete you will receive a copy to review in terms of the fair representation and anonymity of your contribution.

Re 1. And 2.

I should be glad to phone you or meet with you briefly this week, at St. Martin's, at your home, or on 07504 577210, on Wed 2nd Oct 3pm onwards, Thursday 3rd 6.00pm onwards, Friday 4th 6.00pm onwards or on Sunday (as St. Martin's only) between 12.15pm and 5.00pm. Please let me know which is best by emailing or ringing me

I should be glad to interview you on _____.

Please send back to me one copy of the participant consent form in the SAE or bring it when we meet.

You will be glad to know that my work is entirely under supervision and that I have also gained the permission of the Vicar of St. Martin's to conduct this research.

All good wishes

Rev Clare Herbert M.Th., Lecturer in Inclusive Theology at St. Martin-in-the-Fields.

Appendix F: Follow-up letter to participants

Dear _____ ,

Re “Something Borrowed, Something New”

As you know I am in the midst of a Professional Doctorate Degree with Anglia Ruskin University and the Cambridge Federation of Theological Colleges. We have chatted informally about your helping me with this but now I am making a formal request for your help as an interviewee and asking your permission to use material from our interview together in my doctoral thesis and in talks and papers which may be given or published afterwards.

The full title of my work is this “In what ways do lesbian and gay Christians who are in civil partnerships, and who are Anglicans attending St. Martin-in-the-Fields, describe the meaning of their relationships” I wonder if I may interview you about this for about 90 minutes on X day the xth of x month, preferably in the evening. I am very happy to visit you at home or to use the Austen Williams Room at St. Martin’s, whichever you prefer. What matters is that we keep this informal—it is more like a long chat with some game-like exercises thrown in than any sort of grilling!

What happens next and how are confidentiality and personal wellbeing safe-guarded given that I have indicated a written thesis, talks and papers, some of which I hope will be published and all of which are likely to be discussed at St. Martin’s?

1. Once I have written a full transcript of the recorded interview I shall keep it in a secure file and send it to you only. Please correct it for accuracy, edit anything with which you are unhappy, and check for identifying marks. The send it back to me only when you are happy that it can be used and quoted whilst maintaining the level of confidentiality which you require (this will be slightly different for different people)
2. When I have completed my findings, I shall invite you to a focus group to discuss them with other participants having sent you my findings. In that group, we will reflect both on the findings and how they are used inside and outside St. Martin’s in the future.
3. The interviews are not at all designed to unearth hugely sensitive material and I have asked the clergy team if they are willing to act as pastors in the usual way should any unexpectedly difficult material come to light. You may stop the interview at any time and indeed prevent my using any parts of the conversation you wish when you read the transcript. These are necessary precautions but you may also be reassured to hear that in three pilot interviews such sensitive material has hardly emerged and where it has is easily deleted without any harm to the overall direction of this research.
4. All the transcripts will be held in a secure file and deleted once the research and its analysis is completed.
5. I work under strict supervision from two tutors who will also be checking for all the above.

I do hope that you will agree to be interviewed. The process through the pilots has been thought provoking and great fun and I hope that the end result will assist theological and pastoral thinking both at St. Martin’s and in the wider church. The Vicar of St. Martin’s, Rev Dr Sam Wells, is happy with the process as described above and I have his permission for this research to take place.

With all good wishes

Clare Herbert. Lecturer in Inclusive Theology

Appendix G: Participant consent form

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Interviewer: Rev Clare Herbert M.Th. Clergy Office, 5 St. Martin's Place, WC2N 4JJ t. 07504 577210

Project: SOMETHING BORROWED, SOMETHING NEW

Name of Participant: _____

Supervisors: Drs Zoe Bennett and Philomena Cullen.

I agree to take part in the above research project and have read the information in the attached letter for participants. I understand from the participant information and from the introductory conversation with Clare Herbert what my own role will be in this research. There remain no questions which have not been answered satisfactorily.

1. I understand that I am free to withdraw from this research at any time, for any reason and without prejudice.
2. I have been informed that the confidentiality of the information I provide will be safeguarded.
3. I am free to ask questions at any time before and during the study.
4. I have been provided with a copy of this form and the letter which is the Participant Information Sheet
5. Data protection: I understand that any information I supply will be kept in a confidential file and deleted once checked by me for accuracy and once used by the researcher in the research analysis.

Name

Signature.....

Date.....

Please keep a copy of this form together with this request to withdraw, which should be sent to the researcher if you decide to withdraw.

Title of Project: SOMETHING BORROWED, SOMETHING NEW

I WISH TO WITHDRAW FROM THIS STUDY

Signature Date.....

Appendix H: Interview Schedule for “Something Borrowed, Something New”

Start

- a) Test recorder works with a few questions re. name, etc.
- b) Begin interview by reviewing the purpose and type of research and its main question, including the apparent circular nature of the questioning, by expressing gratitude for this time, and by stating the interviewee can halt the interview at any time by raising their hand.

Questions: The main questions are in bold script and may progress anywhere at all with interviewees. Those in lighter script may be used.

Can you tell me how long you have been in a Civil Partnership? (This is a settling question)

1 Can you describe for me the day itself, what happened?

(prompt words: Family, Commitment, Covenant/Contract, Consent, Sacrament, Celebration/Party)

.....

2 What does your Civil partnership mean to you? You may find it easier to define the answer by completing the sentence “For me, being in a Civil Partnership means...”

Can you think of an image or picture you might want to use to describe it?

What would you say were the stages leading up to that day? (Obviously this question involves your life history so please say as little or as much as you wish)

And would you say that you can see stages which have evolved in your relationship since?

.....

3 Some people liken Civil Partnership to marriage. Some people think that it is utterly different from marriage and that it is not marriage for them. What do you think?

Is there anything in traditional patterns of marriage as you understand them that you would want to jettison?

Is there anything you want to keep?

In your relationship, how do you experience difference between you?

How do you work at equality and what are the biggest struggles there?

(prompt words: household tasks, Life/Work balance.)

Some Christians hold what they think of as a very high view of marriage believing that in it we experience something of the life of God. What do you think?

And for some the idea matters a lot that one partner sacrifices himself or herself for the welfare of the other as Christ does for his Church. What do you think of that idea?

Were you, by the way, married before and is this different in any way?

What beliefs undergird your commitment to your partner (often a person has said way too much already for this to be a necessary question)

Do you have any time at all for the notion of becoming “one flesh”?

.....

**4 I want to ask you a little about influences on you to take this step.
Did your faith influence you in any way?**

Some might well see you as having broken through a pretty heavy taboo in the Church to take this public step of commitment. What helped you do this?

Anything within your faith?

Within your church?

Within society?

In your family group?

Among your friends? (*obviously, these are prompt questions in giving as full an answer as possible to question 4, a hinge question in my research*)

5 And has your Civil partnership, either the rite or the relationship, altered your experience of faith in any way?

6 In your experience of being L or G before your Civil Partnership did you experience anything about it as difficult?

What about such difficulties since?

Do you ever feel that being in a Civil partnership has simply legitimised heterosexual norms within society?

And what about gay marriage in this same way?

Do you regard what you have done as prophetic (if any interpretation of this word is called for I have used the words “pointing to where God may be at work within society”)

.....

There follow three games with the use of cards, photographs, and illustrations

1. Cards

Using national gallery postcards I ask participants to choose any cards which resonate with their understanding of God as God is understood /or not in their relationship.

2. Photographs of Churches

Which of these would you choose to portray your understanding of “church” in relation to your CP?

3. Illustrations of Bible Stories, 5 from the OT and 5 from the NT

Which of these stories say anything to you about your relationship of Civil Partnership?

.....

Debriefing

Are you ok, and thank you!

Is there anything you would like to tell me about the process of the interview or how I did it? And what about content, was that ok? Any surprises?

I will let you have a transcript of this interview within the coming fortnight. Please would you check it for accuracy, confidentiality as we arranged, and choose a new name for yourself. And if there is anything you want editing out completely you have only to say.

Appendix I: Pilot Interview Schedule

Briefing while testing that the microphone works well, that the interviewee is comfortable with the process and what comes next, timing check etc.

Section 1 of “Meaning and Marriage” etc.

What is the meaning of your Civil Partnership?

What is the importance of your Civil Partnership to you?

What images or pictures would you use to describe it?

“For me, being in a Civil Partnership means....” What words would you add?

Some people liken Civil Partnership to marriage. Some people are clear that it’s not marriage for them. What do you think?

Some people have said to me that at the heart of Civil Partnership there is “Equality of mutual fulfilment”. What do these words mean for you in terms of your own experience?

Do you think that being in a Civil Partnership adds to or changes your experience of faith in any way?

Section 2 “Queer Experience”

You have talked about making legal in a public way a lifelong commitment to stay faithful to each other, but there is a taboo in the world-wide church over this. What has helped or hindered you in breaking through this taboo?

Do you think there is anything in your own Christian faith which has influenced you to take this step?

Have attitudes and events in wider society influenced you to take this step?

What about your family and their influence?

Friends?

So are there things or people who hindered you in your process through young and middle adult life as a gay Christian?

Section 3 “Theology”

Cards offering possible images of God.

Choose three which speak to you in any way of God in relation to your partnership.

Pictures and words from the Old Testament and the New Testament

At this stage there were twenty to choose from which may resonate or not with your experience.

Finally, I am interested in concepts of Church. I wonder if you would choose the three

which mean most to you in terms of how you see Church and your relationship of Civil Partnership and what it is.

Debriefing, from checking how that went and whether they would like to change anything about the way that I interview, to room tidying and leaving to “de-role”

Appendix J: Questionnaire for “Something Borrowed, Something New”

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Questions

1. Please tell me how long you have been in a Civil Partnership?
2. And can you describe for me the day itself, what happened? Specifically, how many people came? Did those people include family members? Did it have a festival or party air about it or was it a small quiet activity?
3. Did you also hold a religious event around it?
4. If you did, which event mattered more to you? Did more/different people come to the two events?
5. What does your civil partnership mean to you? You may find it easier to define the answer by completing the sentence “For me/us being in a Civil Partnership means...”
6. Can you think of an image or picture you might want to use to describe it?
7. For how long, in very approximate terms, did you know each other before your CP?
8. And would you say that you can see stages which have evolved in your relationship since?
9. Some people liken Civil Partnership to marriage? Some people think that it is utterly different from marriage and that it is not marriage for them. What do you think?
10. Is there anything in traditional patterns of marriage as you understand them that you would want to jettison?
11. Is there anything you want to keep?
12. Some Christians hold what they think of as a very high view of marriage believing that in it we experience something of the life of God. Do you believe that you experience something of the life of God within your relationship of Civil Partnership? If so, what of God do you know there?
13. Were you married before you entered a CP?
14. I want to ask you a little about influences on you to take this step. Did your faith influence you in any way?

15. Some might well see you as having broken through a pretty heavy taboo in the Church to take this public step of commitment. What helped you do this?
16. Within your church?
17. Within society?
18. In your family group?
19. Among your friends?
20. And has your civil partnership, either the rite or the relationship, altered your experience of faith in any way?

Appendix K: List of themes with their frequency of occurrence among participants

1. Age: Only 1 participant made mention of their age at the time of the CP
2. Anger, expression of in interview: 8 (2+ index cards comments)
3. Anxiety, expressed feelings of in some situations: 7 (1+)
4. Authority: 2
5. Bible Themes of significance: 11 participants (6+ index cards, including response to direct question)
6. Celebration: 5 (1+ index card)
7. Changes: (in law 12 participants, see Marriage) actively changing history 1 participant
8. Children: 4 participants (-1 index card)
9. Christian faith of significance in choosing a life partner: 3 participants (-1 index cards)
10. Church: 13 participants (6+ index cards, including response to direct question)
11. Clothes, special for event: 9 (-1 index card)
12. Community: 2
13. Consciousness, political as LGBT: 2
14. Civil Partnership qua event: 13 (2+ index cards)
15. Civil Partnership qua legal act: 9 (1+ index cards)
16. Civil Partnership, meaning of: 13 (8+ index cards including response to direct question) Include also here Images of Civil Partnership listed below: 11. (2 index cards)
17. Civil Partnership, experience of event of registration: 7 (2 index cards)
18. Civil Partnership, use of language about life stages: 10
19. Civil Partnership, validating action: 4 (1+ index cards) See also “Recognition” below, 8.
20. Enduring relationship: 1 (see also monogamy)
21. Equality: 11 ((3+ index cards)
22. Faith: 8 (3 index cards)
23. Family: Father 7, Mother 7, as negative and positive presence 13, creating new forms of 5 (6+ index cards)
24. Fears: 4 (-1 index cards) (see also anxiety, tensions)
25. Friends: 5 (-1 index cards)
26. Gender: 10 (3+ index cards)
27. God: 12 participants (5+ index cards including response to direct question)
28. Guidelines: 1
29. Heterosexual norms: 8 (2+ index cards)
30. History, sweep of: 3
31. Home, creating: 3 (all women)
32. Homophobia: 4 (all women)
33. Identity: 4 (2+ index cards)
34. Images of Civil Partnership: 11
35. Illness: 2 (both women)
36. Influences: 11 (2 index cards, including response to direct question)
37. Interview: effect of process on participants: 6 (1+ index cards)
38. Jesus: 5 (surprising result, check carefully as if this is the case little identification with for some)

39. Jettison (gender typical roles in marriage) 3
40. Language: 3
41. Layers of meaning: 1 (ambivalent meanings 1)
42. Love: 6 (1+ index cards, again surprising result)
43. Marriage: 13 (11 index cards including response to direct question)
44. Narrative: 3 (1 index card)
45. One flesh: 8 (1 index card)
46. Partner: 5 (all women)
47. Party: (or meal or celebration) 13
48. Private/Public continuum: 7 (2 index cards)
49. Prophecy: 5 (1+ index cards)
50. Protest: 5 (1 index card)
51. Queer Theory and Theology: Only 1 participant uses the word queer. However there is evidence of queer thinking and theology 11 transcripts (6 index cards)
52. Recognition afforded by CP: 8 (1+ index cards)
53. Relationship, effect of commitment to: 4
54. Relationship, differences in: 8 (1+ index cards)
55. Relationship, effect of being in CP: 6, (2 index cards)
56. Relationship, roles in: 3 (see also heterosexual norms)
57. Relationship, value of monogamy: 7 (1+ index cards)
58. Sacrifice, a good? 7 (part of nature of relationship/marriage)
59. Sadness, feelings of: 9 (2 index cards)
60. Secrecy: 3
61. Self-awareness: 3
62. Self of the researcher, effects of interviews: resonances in all interviews and questionnaires 13 (6+ index cards) see also shocks and surprises, below.
63. Service/Liturgy: 13 (not necessarily as separate event) (4 index cards)
64. Service/Liturgy, uncertainty over name and nature: 7 (this includes services held for the participants themselves)
65. Shocks and surprises involved in researcher reading transcripts: 10 (add to self of researcher above)
66. Sin: only mentioned by 2 participants
67. St. Martin-in-the-Fields: 12 (4+ index cards)
68. Spirituality: 5 (1+ index cards)
69. Taboo: 10 (3 index cards)
70. Tensions, involved in being LGBT: 7 (2+ index cards)
71. Theology: 9 (2+ index cards)
72. Time, how long into the relationship did the CP event occur? 13
73. Transformation of intimacy: language resonant in 10 transcripts
74. Uncertainty: 5
75. Violence and/or threats of violence: 11 i.e. all transcripts (degree varies, most severe sometimes linked to outward looks)
76. Work: 6

Appendix L: Themes coded by their frequency of mention within and across categories of overarching theme.

A list of themes with

- a) Their frequency of occurrence among participants
- b) The amount of comment space each subtheme attracted on index cards (given as +)
- c) A colour coding to demonstrate the potential number of thematic categories to which each subtheme belongs. (Yellow = 3; Blue = 2; Red = 1)

1. Age: Only 1 participant made mention of their age at the time of the CP
2. Anger, expression of in interview: 8 (2+ index cards comments)
3. Anxiety, expressed feelings of in some situations: 7 (1+)
4. Authority: 2
5. Bible Themes of significance: 11 participants (6+ index cards, including response to direct question)
6. Celebration: 5 (1+ index card)
7. Changes: (in law 12 participants, see Marriage) actively changing history 1 participant
8. Children: 4 participants (-1 index card)
9. Christian faith of significance in choosing a life partner: 3 participants (-1 index cards)
10. Church: 13 participants (6+ index cards, including response to direct question)
11. Clothes, special for event: 9 (-1 index card)
12. Community: 2
13. Consciousness, political as LGBT: 2
14. Civil Partnership qua event: 13 (2+ index cards)
15. Civil Partnership qua legal act: 9 (1+ index cards)
16. Civil Partnership, meaning of: 13 (8+ index cards including response to direct question) Include also here Images of Civil Partnership listed below: 11. (2 index cards)
17. Civil Partnership, experience of event of registration: 7 (2 index cards)
18. Civil Partnership, use of language about life stages: 10
19. Civil Partnership, validating action: 4 (1+ index cards) See also "Recognition" below, 8.
20. Enduring relationship: 1 (see also monogamy)
21. Equality: 11 ((3+ index cards)
22. Faith: 8 (3 index cards)
23. Family: Father 7, Mother 7, as negative and positive presence 13, creating new forms of 5 (6+ index cards)
24. Fears: 4 (-1 index cards) (see also anxiety, tensions)
25. Friends: 5 (-1 index cards)
26. Gender: 10 (3+ index cards)
27. God: 12 participants (5+ index cards including response to direct question)
28. Guidelines: 1
29. Heterosexual norms: 8 (2+ index cards)
30. History, sweep of: 3

31. Home, creating: 3 (all women)
32. Homophobia: 4 (all women)
33. Identity: 4 (2+ index cards)
34. Images of Civil Partnership: 11
35. Illness: 2 (both women)
36. Influences: 11 (2 index cards, including response to direct question)
37. Interview: effect of process on participants: 6 (1+ index cards)
38. Jesus: 5 (surprising result, check carefully as if this is the case little identification with for some)
39. Jettison (gender typical roles in marriage) 3
40. Language: 3
41. Layers of meaning: 1 (ambivalent meanings 1)
42. Love: 6 (1+ index cards, again surprising result)
43. Marriage: 13 (11 index cards including response to direct question)
44. Narrative: 3 (1 index card)
45. One flesh: 8 (1 index card)
46. Partner: 5 (all women)
47. Party: (or meal or celebration) 13
48. Private/Public continuum: 7 (2 index cards)
49. Prophecy: 5 (1+ index cards)
50. Protest: 5 (1 index card)
51. Queer Theory and Theology: Only 1 participant uses the word queer. However there is evidence of queer thinking and theology 11 transcripts (6 index cards)
52. Recognition afforded by CP: 8 (1+ index cards)
53. Relationship, effect of commitment to: 4
54. Relationship, differences in: 8 (1+ index cards)
55. Relationship, effect of being in CP: 6, (2 index cards)
56. Relationship, roles in: 3 (see also heterosexual norms)
57. Relationship, value of monogamy: 7 (1+ index cards)
58. Sacrifice, a good? 7 (part of nature of relationship/marriage)
59. Sadness, feelings of: 9 (2 index cards)
60. Secrecy: 3
61. Self-awareness: 3
62. Self of the researcher, effects of interviews: resonances in all interviews and questionnaires 13 (6+ index cards) see also shocks and surprises, below.
63. Service/Liturgy: 13 (not necessarily as separate event) (4 index cards)
64. Service/Liturgy, uncertainty over name and nature: 7 (this includes services held for the participants themselves)
65. Shocks and surprises involved in researcher reading transcripts: 10 (add to self of researcher above)
66. Sin: only mentioned by 2 participants
67. St. Martin-in-the-Fields: 12 (4+ index cards)
68. Spirituality: 5 (1+ index cards)
69. Taboo: 10 (3 index cards)
70. Tensions, involved in being LGBT: 7 (2+ index cards)
71. Theology: 9 (2+ index cards)
72. Time, how long into the relationship did the CP event occur? 13
73. Transformation of intimacy: language resonant in 10 transcripts
74. Uncertainty: 5

75. Violence and/or threats of violence: 11 i.e. all transcripts (degree varies, most severe sometimes linked to outward looks)
76. Work: 6

Appendix M: A list of themes with their final allocation to a category of overarching theme.

Theme 1: Outward and Visible Sign: the rite of civil partnership—**YELLOW**

Theme 2: Exodus to Homecoming: Core theological story—**GREEN**

Theme 3: Is this Marriage or not? The nature of the relationship—**BLUE**

Theme 4: Effects of the Interview on Researcher and Participants—**RED**

1. Age: Only 1 participant made mention of their age at the time of the CP
2. Anger, expression of in interview: 8 (2+ index cards comments)
3. Anxiety, expressed feelings of in some situations: 7 (1+)
4. Authority: 2
5. Bible Themes of significance: 11 participants (6+ index cards, including response to direct question)
6. Celebration: 5 (1+ index card)
7. Changes: (in law 12 participants, see Marriage) actively changing history 1 participant
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14. Civil Partnership qua event: 13 (2+ index cards)
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76. Work: 6