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ARTICLE

What's in a Name? An Examination of Current Definitions of Resource Churches

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Abstract

This article is the first in a trilogy exploring the concept of resource churches, providing a starting point to develop a comprehensive understanding of their implications for the Church of England. The scene is set by introducing the impact of this recent model of church planting, which has become widespread since the ambitious programme of church development in London in the 1990s. This opening piece examines understanding of what constitutes a resource church and identifies flaws in the existing definition. The existence of resource churches as a distinct model is demonstrated by comparison to concepts of hub churches, megachurches, minster churches and resourcing churches. The need to discuss such distinctions provides evidence that an unambiguous definition for 'resource church' is needed. Evaluation of the five core elements in Bishop Ric Thorpe's definition of resource churches establishes the need for research to determine beliefs and practices of current resource churches.

Keywords: church planting; hub churches; megachurches; minster churches; resource church; resourcing churches

Introduction

Resource churches are a rapidly growing phenomenon in the Church of England. The first church to be identified as a resource church, St Peter's in Brighton, was planted in 2009, with six resource churches emerging by 2015. Currently there are more than 100 resource churches in the UK and it is estimated that by 2030, there may be as many as 300.[2] This has even been perceived as a 'takeover' of the Church of England by evangelical networks.[3] It has been extremely difficult, however, to provide a definition for the term 'resource church'. Perhaps this is unsurprising, considering that there has been immense difficulty defining the word

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[2] Ric Thorpe, *Resource Churches: A Story of Church Planting and Revitalization across the Nation* (London: The Gregory Centre for Church Multiplication 2021), p. 35.

[3] https://modernchurch.org.uk/losing-something-irreplaceable-and-of-great-value-to-all (accessed January 2023).

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'church' itself. Avery Dulles, who provides six models for understanding the character of the church, says 'the mysterious character of the Church … rules out the possibility of proceeding from clear and univocal concepts, or from definitions in the usual sense of the word … Some would therefore conclude that ecclesiology must be apophatic; that we can have only a theologia negativa of the Church, affirming not what it is but only what it is not.'[4] Even so, the level of energy and financial resources that have already been directed towards the designation of resource churches[5] implies that a definition is available or at least possible. The dangers of not defining resource churches clearly are highlighted by Michael Moynagh. Reflecting on the phrase 'fresh expressions' being 'used so loosely that almost anything was covered by it', he says that 'whatever language the denomination uses to describe witnessing communities … the definition must be both transparent and open enough for conversations to flesh it out'.[6] A description of what resource churches are not, such as 'a resource church is not merely a large church, merely a church with lots of students, a badge that we can use to honour a church that we favour, a cathedral, a parish',[7] is insufficient by itself.

This trilogy of articles will establish for the first time a foundational layer of understanding concerning the nature of resource churches, and the discourse surrounding them. The purpose of this first article is to evaluate existing definitions of 'resource churches'. It will devote considerable attention to Bishop Ric Thorpe's definition: 'A resource church is designated by its bishop to be a church-planting church which trains leaders to resource and support mission across a diocese.'[8] This, and other definitions of 'resource churches', and associated terminology, such as 'resourcing church', will be explored in this article. An interrogation of attempts to define resource churches will pave the way for a second article, which will explore the identification of precursors to the recent resource church framework; and a third article, which will provide an analysis of opposition to this model of church growth.

Emergence

Bishop Ric Thorpe's definition of resource churches took around twenty years to develop. Although this was only formulated in 2021, the first reference appears to have been by Mike Breen in 1997. Breen writes that the church in Ephesus 'had become a resource church to the region, sending out missionaries and church planters and offering a teaching and training base that touched the whole of Asia

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[4]Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (New York: Image Books, 2002), p. 10.

[5]Between 2014 and 2021, approximately £91.3 million of Strategic Development Funding had been allocated to new resource churches or to developing existing churches into resource churches. https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2022-03/IRLS%20-%20final%20report%20%282%29.pdf (accessed January 2023).

[6]Michael Moynagh, *Being Church, Doing Life: Creating Gospel Communities where Life Happens* (Grand Rapids, MI: Monarch Books, 2014), p. 180.

[7]This outline of what a resource church is not, which is used here to illustrate the application of apophatic theology to resource churches, originally accompanied a definition provided by the Strategy and Development Unit of the Church of England in early 2017. Alan Bing, *Reimagining Resourcing Churches: A Minster Model* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2018), p. 7.

[8]Thorpe, *Resource Churches*, p. 24.

Minor' and that he felt called to lead St Thomas's in Sheffield to similarly 'function as a resource to its city and region . . . to be a base for church planting and mission and a centre for teaching and training'.[9] The three characteristics in Breen's understanding of a resource church are:

- To resource mission across a city or region
- To plant churches
- To act as a learning community, including development of leaders.

These characteristics have continued to be important in later definitions. The belief that the church in Ephesus was an early example of a resource church will be examined in my subsequent article.

The next step towards defining resource churches seems to have been made in the landmark report *Mission-Shaped Church,* published in 2004. 'Resourcing networks' are referred to under the category of 'network-focused churches' in a chapter identifying categories of 'fresh expressions' of church. The reference to 'networks' rather than 'churches' reflects that this was not a developed strategy across the Church of England, but a description of what was taking place at the time through groups of churches.

St Thomas Crookes (Breen's 'Ephesus'), as well as New Wine, Soul Survivor, and Holy Trinity Brompton, were recognized here as 'large churches or networks that actively church plant, or serve as a resource for planting, or that provide a model or template for church planting within particular Anglican traditions'.[10] The New Wine leaders' network started in the late 1970s at St Andrew's, Chorleywood, when David and Mary Pytches returned from Chile, having experienced church planting and spiritual renewal there. Seminars about church planting were held from the first New Wine event in 1989. These were closely connected to the National Church Planting Conference, which started at Holy Trinity Brompton in 1987.[11] By the time *Mission-Shaped Church* was published, Holy Trinity Brompton had planted seven churches within the Diocese of London and two churches at the invitation of the Bishop of Southwark. Soul Survivor, which also emerged from the New Wine network of churches, supported the start of Soul Exeter in 2002 as a monthly youth celebration, leading to the start of Unlimited as a church focused on reaching young people with no interest in faith or church. It should be noted that Bishop Graham Cray, who was the Chair for the Mission-Shaped Church Working Group, has been part of New Wine since it began.

It is observed in *Mission-Shaped Church* that these networks 'are an important resource for the mission of the Church of England, because they combine much needed vision, resources and entrepreneurial skill'.[12] It is believed that the inculturation of the gospel through local churches benefits from the provision of resources

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[9]Mike Breen, *The Body Beautiful: Check-lists to Improve your Spiritual Health and Fitness from the Letters to the Seven Churches* (Crowborough: Monarch Publishing, 1997), p. 25.

[10]The Mission-Shaped Church Working Group, *Mission-Shaped Church: Church Planting and Fresh Expressions of Church in a Changing Context* (London: Church House Publishing, 2004), p. 66.

[11]Paul Harcourt and Ralph Turner (eds.), *Greater Things: The Story of New Wine So Far* (London: SPCK, 2019).

[12]Working Group, *Mission-Shaped*, p. 66.

through these networks and that dioceses should, therefore, work collaboratively with them. The perception that entrepreneurship[13] and vision, which have been associated with managerialism, are a resource for the mission of the Church of the England has been a source of contention. *Mission-Shaped Church* responds to these emerging conflicts by warning against 'treating major churches or networks as somehow un-Anglican' and suggests that because of episcopal support we can be reassured 'there is no room for empire building, or sectarian or illegal action'. From this point on, authorization by diocesan bishops has been considered as an aspect of the definition of 'resource church'.

Thorpe explains that the foundation for his understanding of resource churches was laid in a learning community at the European Church Planting Network in October 2008. This network was established in 2007 with Breen as the General Director, and had the goal of seeing 500 new churches planted across Europe by the end of 2011. This was exceeded, as 1137 churches were subsequently planted within this time frame. In a reflection exercise with Sandy Millar, Tricia Neill and Miles Toulmin, all key figures within Holy Trinity Brompton, Thorpe – who was the Priest-in-Charge of St Paul's, Shadwell at this stage (a plant from Holy Trinity Brompton) – drew a map including four city-centre resource churches. This provided an initial sense of direction.

Later in that year, the Bishop of Chichester, John Hind, approached Nicky Gumbel (the vicar of Holy Trinity Brompton) about planting into St Peter's Brighton, which was in danger of closure. In an informal conversation, Mark Elsdon-Dew, the Director of Communications at Holy Trinity Brompton, noted that there was no clear vision for St Peter's Brighton. There was a strong feeling, however, that they did not want churches to close, and the potential for a revitalization 'went down a storm'.[14] Thorpe explains that 'because it was done in such a focused way, over a short period of time, St Peter's Brighton marked something new'. In 2011, St Peter's Brighton, which was Holy Trinity Brompton's first plant outside the city of London, was the first church to be identified as a 'resource church'.[15]

From 2012, the Bishop of London, Richard Chartres, encouraged other bishops to explore the possibility of collaborating with Holy Trinity Brompton, linking them with his 'Adviser for Church Planting', Thorpe. In a description of growth through initiatives such as Alpha and Fresh Expressions outside the city of London, Jason Byassee emphasizes the significance of this 'creative relationship' with Chartres. In the mid-1990s, empty churches were dotted across the landscape of the city of London. By the time Chartres retired from office in 2017, he 'was out of empty churches'.[16] This had such a significant impact it inspired people all over the country to explore the resource church framework. In a lecture on church growth at Lambeth Palace two years before his retirement, Chartres suggested that

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[13]This is explored more thoroughly in Michael Volland, *The Minister as Entrepreneur: Leading and Growing in an Age of Rapid Change* (Westmont, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015).

[14]Conversation with Mark Elsdon-Dew on 22 March 2022.

[15]Thorpe, *Resource Churches*, p. 35.

[16]Jason Byassee, *Northern Lights: Resurrecting the Church in the North of England* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2020), p. 83.

the success of initiatives in London resulted in 'requests for help in establishing city centre resource churches' in other parts of the country.[17]

At the invitation of Chartres, in January 2013 Thorpe presented his proposal to a group of 50 bishops and diocesan secretaries. He used this platform to articulate his vision that 'a key plank of a national church-planting strategy should be to plant large church-planting ("hub") churches in England's largest city centres'.[18] This was not simply a recommendation, as in *Mission-Shaped Church*, to collaborate with a few churches or networks operating on the periphery. Instead, it was suggested that this project should build on previous successes to adopt a national approach, which could result in the doubling in size of the Church of England. We will return to the theme of the city centre base, and the concept of 'hub churches', later in this article.

In a further meeting in January 2015, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, said 'it would be great for every diocese to have a resource church – and not one, but two or three', which Thorpe interpreted as 'a green light for the emerging work'.[19] A similar endorsement is given in the foreword to Thorpe's book about resource churches, in which Welby writes 'resource churches are not a new thing, but part of an ancient ecclesiology and practice'.[20] Whereas in 2015, Welby focused on the potential future impact of resource churches, here he proposes that they are to be valued as part of the tradition that we have inherited. Like the connection Breen notices to the church in Ephesus, this claim that the credibility of resource churches is increased by their historical roots, will be evaluated in my subsequent article.

Thorpe first wrote about resource churches in an article summarizing the meeting in January 2015. This article identifies four core values which it says 'will catalyse a missional flow of ministry that will genuinely resource the church across the whole city'. These are generosity, partnership, audacity and humility. It also outlined ways in which resource churches 'can release their capacity to energise a city vision that many other churches can get behind'. The rhetoric at this stage demonstrated a level of confidence, which repositioned the resource church as integral to church growth. At this pivotal moment, as the language used to discuss resource churches at this time started to gain momentum, five key concepts became prominent in the discourse. These were 'city-wide thinking/ vision (supporting bishops)', 'resourcing others', 'learning communities', 'planting churches', and 'developing leaders'.

By 2017, there was a significant shift in defining resource churches as the five key concepts from Thorpe's article in 2015 were replaced with five core elements. These first appear in a definition by the Strategy and Development Unit of the Church of England in early 2017, which reads as follows:

A resource church is a church which is designated a resource church by the diocesan bishop and part of a diocesan strategy to evangelize a city or town

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[17]www.london.anglican.org/articles/new-fire-in-london-lambeth-lecture (accessed January 2023).

[18]Thorpe, *Resource Churches*, p. 39.

[19]Thorpe, *Resource Churches*, p. 41.

[20]Justin Welby, 'Foreword', in Thorpe, *Resource Churches*, p. 15.

and transform society. It is also intentionally resourced to plant and revitalize other churches, develops a pipeline of leaders for further planting, and provides other resources for mission across a city or town.[21]

Alongside this, the concept of a resource church was described through a sequence of negatives:

> a resource church is ... not merely a large church, not merely a church with lots of students, not a badge that we can use to honour a church that we favour, not a cathedral, not a parish. It is a 'new minster' (strategic, city-wide, resource to give away).[22]

This outline of what a resource church is *not* responds to criticisms that had crystallized concerning resource churches, including that resource churches primarily grow through transfer growth from other churches, represent a limited range of traditions, and are unnecessarily replacing diocesan mother churches and the parish system. In the introduction to this definition, the Strategy and Development Unit express a hesitancy, and desire for care, about describing what is meant by a resource church, and stress that this is only a 'current definition', indicating an openness to change and refinement. Their struggle to put a resource church into words is also indicated by the sheer length of this definition, which is over twice the length of Thorpe's definition.

Thorpe provides the following definition of the term 'resource church' in his book in 2021, a revision of his doctoral dissertation presented the preceding year:

> A resource church is designated by its bishop to be a church-planting church which trains its leaders to resource and support mission across a diocese.

He clarifies that this consists of these five core elements:

1. Authorised by the diocesan bishop
2. Part of a diocesan strategy to evangelise a city or town and transform society
3. Intentionally resourced to plant and revitalise churches
4. Actively develops a pipeline of leaders for further planting
5. Provides other resources for mission across their city or town.[23]

Thorpe's definition, including the five core elements of resources churches, will be evaluated later in this article, having first explored other definitions and terms associated with resource churches.

Other Definitions

The first of two definitions, which present alternatives to the definition offered by Thorpe, was written by Alan Bing in 2018 as part of his Grove booklet in which he

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[21] Alan Bing, *Reimagining Resourcing Churches: A Minster Model* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2018), p. 7.
[22] Bing, *Resourcing Churches*, p. 7.
[23] Thorpe, *Resource Churches*, pp. 24-27.

reflects on resource churches in rural settings. Bing's reasons for preferring the term 'resourcing church' to 'resource church' will be examined later in this article. He believes that because resourcing churches are being developed in a wide range of contexts, including youth and rural, there is a need for criteria as to what constitutes a resourcing church that is both specific and differentiated. Building upon the work of Mike Booker, who had identified two types of resourcing church, Bing provides the following three categories:

- 'Large churches sending out teams to graft into an existing church or to plant into a redundant church, typically in a city, with a focus on students, and with a view to replanting.'
- 'Mid-sized churches, typically in market towns with an organic relationship with the villages around them, planting out missional communities, and sharing resources and people with the churches around them.'
- 'Rural beacon churches, usually not meeting in a church building, focused on those not currently involved in the life of the church, typically children and young families.'

Behind all three of these categories, Bing claims, is 'the underlying and linking idea ... of the minster church, whereby resources are gathered centrally in order to be shared more widely'. Like Welby's endorsement that resource churches are part of an ancient ecclesiology, and Breen's narrative about Ephesus, the suggestion that resource churches are a renewal of the minster church model requires further examination. This, and empirical research into the experiences of resource churches in varying settings, may confirm or challenge the view that there are noticeable similarities, and differences, between these categories. Bing defines a market-town resourcing church as:

a church which is designated a resourcing church by the diocesan bishop and part of a diocesan strategy to evangelise and transform society in the town and surrounding area. It is also intentionally resourced to plant fresh expressions of church and revitalise churches, develops a pipeline of leaders for further planting, and provides other resources for mission across the town and its surrounding area.[24]

It is frustrating that Bing does not also elucidate his definition of a market-town resourcing church by providing similar definitions for large, typically city-centre based, resource/resourcing churches and rural beacon resource/resourcing churches. The main differences to the definition by the Strategy and Development Unit, of which this is a reinterpretation, are the emphasis on towns and surrounding area and the reference to planting fresh expressions rather than planting churches, which Bing considers to be more suitable for this context.[25] There is a danger in this of introducing a false dichotomy between churches and fresh expressions, which are new forms of church. This reflects a suspicion in parts of the fresh expression

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[24]Bing, *Resourcing Churches*, pp. 11-13.
[25]Bing, *Resourcing Churches*, p. 12.

movement towards aspects of the resource church framework, such as by Tina Hodgett and Paul Bradbury who argue that resource churches undervalue contextualization.[26]

The second definition meriting comparison to Thorpe's was put forward by Matthew Porter, the Vicar of The Belfrey, which has recently been designated as a resource church in the Diocese of York. Following a conversation with John Sentamu, the former Archbishop of York, about The Belfrey increasingly becoming a resource church, Porter was one of the earliest people to write about resource churches in a blog in June 2012. In this, there is little attempt to formally describe what constitutes a resource church as it is suggested that 'the phraseology isn't crucial'. Instead, focus is placed primarily on generosity, which is proposed to be the most important value of resource churches. As an example of a church having 'caught hold of the vision of resourcing others', he refers to Thorpe ('my friend Ric'), who in 2010 had led St Paul's Shadwell to plant both Church of All Hallows, Bow and St Peter's Church, Bethnal Green. In the opening words to this blog, 'I believe The Belfrey is called by God to be a resource church', the concept of God's calling to be a resource church,[27] explored in 1997 by Breen, is reintroduced. Despite challenges concerning the discernment and evaluation of prophetic words, it could be argued that calling from God should be a key part of the definition of resource churches, perhaps even preceding episcopal authorization. This could be demonstrated through empirical research concerning the extent to which experiences of calling play a role in the development of resource churches.

Developing ideas from this blog, Porter wrote a book in 2020 in which he articulates more clearly the characteristics of resource churches. The main title of Porter's book, *Overflow*, captures the essence of what he believes to be at the heart of resource churches, returning to the theme in his blog of being generous as a result of experiencing God's abundant provision. The suggestion in the subtitle that we can gain 'learning from the inspirational resource church of Antioch in the book of Acts', like other claims about early resource churches, needs to be tested. By describing what resource churches are, definitions of resource churches that were already in existence at that time are developed and refined by Porter. He says that resource churches are 'local churches which exist to influence their region by growing and planting on a regular basis'.[28] The emphasis here on church planting is in continuity with Thorpe's development of the concept of resource churches. However, reflecting The Belfrey's vision to 'serve God's transformation of the north', Porter refers to the region as the place that is resourced (in contrast with the city, town or surrounding area). This has more in common with Breen's initial description of a resource church, which also referred to region. Porter draws attention to the role of positive influence, something not mentioned elsewhere in descriptions of resource churches. Positive influence has become associated with leadership

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[26]Tina Hodgett and Paul Bradbury, 'Pioneering Mission Is a Spectrum', *ANVIL* 34.1 (2018), pp. 30-34.
[27]https://matthewporter.blog/2012/06/20/becoming-a-resource-church/ (accessed January 2023).
[28]Matthew Porter, *Overflow: Learning from the Inspirational Resource Church of Antioch in the Book of Acts* (Milton Keynes: Authentic Media, 2020), Preface p. xiii.

through the work of Bernard M. Bass.[29] The following seven characteristics of resource churches (an extra two than in Thorpe's list of core elements) are also provided by Porter:

1. Generously make their resources available to others
2. Resource with prayer and purpose
3. Embody a number of key reforming characteristics
4. Grow large, young and contemporary
5. Centres of vocational and leadership development
6. Revitalize and plant
7. Work strategically with church authorities.

Not only does Porter highlight the importance of prayer but as 'key reforming characteristics' he adds the festivity and simplicity to Thorpe's four core values of generosity, unity, audacity and humility. Porter seems less afraid than others who have written about resource churches to acknowledge that, as many critics have said, resource churches are using modern music and other creative steps to reach the 18s to 30s. Perhaps this is because he is leading a large church, known for its charismatic evangelical heritage and with a popular student ministry, rather than a national denominational initiative. Leadership development is widened, similar to the earlier emphasis on learning communities, so that it 'is not just for church leadership, but is about equipping young leaders to lead well in every sector of society, including business, education, the arts, media and entertainment'. In further contrast with Thorpe's five core elements of a resource church, Porter describes creative partnership in much broader terms than authorization by diocesan bishops, clearly signalling that this should also include working with equivalent denominational leaders and seeking to be in good relation with other local churches and ministries.[30] Like Bing's reinterpretation for market-town contexts of definitions of resource churches, of which the pertinence for these discussions should not be underestimated as a result of its slim booklet format, Porter has offered several adaptations that are significant for enabling Thorpe's definition of resource churches to be evaluated.

'Hub Churches', 'Resourcing Churches', 'Megachurches' and 'Minsters'

Before assessing the value of the definition from Thorpe, it is essential to disentangle the concept of resource churches from four other terms with which it has become associated.

A 'hub' was referred to by Thorpe in his presentation about city-centre resource churches in 2013, reflecting that, during the development of resource churches, these words have often been used interchangeably. However, in some dioceses in the Church of England, a strategy concerning resource churches and a strategy concerning hub churches are implemented in parallel. For example, in the

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[29]Bernard M. Bass described idealized influence as one of the four basic components of transformational leadership. Bernard M. Bass, *Transformational Leadership* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2008).

[30]Porter, *Overflow*, pp. 138-43.

Diocese of Liverpool, a 'hub and spoke' for multiplying congregations has been implemented through the Transforming Wigan project since 2015, and a separate project to plant new resource churches with a focus on reaching the missing generations began in 2018.[31] The Diocese of Coventry clarifies that in contrast with resource churches, which are gifted at 'investing in teams … in order to give ministry away', hub churches 'offer a gathering point and a focus where people can come from local churches that the hub is seeking to enable and support'.[32] Central to the concept of hub churches is the metaphor of the inner part of a circular object, such as a wheel, from which spokes radiate. This metaphor is highly relevant where, resulting from a clear network of relationships existing, movement at the centre can have a pivotal effect on the whole, such as through the 'church-planting hubs' identified as part of the church planting development strategy of New Wine.[33] It is not clear that in resource churches more generally, connections between spokes and a hub are obvious enough for this image to be coherent. Often the relationships between a resource church and other churches will require more negotiation than the hub and spoke model suggests.

The word 'resourcing', rather than 'resource', was first used in connection with 'networks' in *Mission-Shaped Church* in 2004, and since then has been applied to 'churches'. Similarly to the concept of hub churches, the term 'resourcing church' has often been used interchangeably with 'resource church', such as in one advertisement for a Vicar, which names the church as St John's Resource Church Blackpool and elsewhere in the advert as St John's Blackpool Resourcing Church. Sometimes preference for the term 'resourcing church' over 'resource church' has been a deliberate choice, such as in the Diocese of Leicester which refers consistently to 'resourcing churches'. Thorpe explains that 'while the descriptor "resource churches" is most commonly used, some dioceses have wanted to focus attention on the resourcing that they will do rather than the receiving of resources from the diocese'.[34] Bing provides three reasons in his Grove booklet for referring to 'resourcing churches' rather than 'resource churches'. Firstly, he suggests that this is more grammatically correct because 'resourcing' is an adjective rather than a verb. However, this appears to ignore the concept of a noun adjunct or attributive noun, as 'resource' could be interpreted as a noun rather than a verb. Secondly, he says 'it helpfully carries with it the connotation of giving, rather than taking', whereas '"resource" is a more static word and implies stockpiling'. The clarity of this seems beneficial, especially as I have heard confusion expressed about whether the concept of resource churches means that they are meant to be receiving or giving resources. Nevertheless, while the ultimate goal of resource churches is to be resourcing mission and evangelism, the framework is not solely one-directional. Thorpe's five core elements include both providing resources for mission across their city or town

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[31] https://d1x8239b43517c.cloudfront.net/media-uploads/3/5/job/544/Transform%20overview.pdf (January 2023).

[32] https://d3hgrlq6yacptf.cloudfront.net/5f3ffda5728e0/content/pages/documents/diocesan-growth-strategy-faqs27323018284.pdf (January 2023).

[33] Paul Harcourt, 'All Saints Woodford Wells', in Ric Thorpe, *Resource Churches: A Story of Church Planting and Revitalization across the Nation* (London: The Gregory Centre for Church Multiplication 2021), p. 137.

[34] Thorpe, *Resource Churches*, p. 39.

and being intentionally resourced to do this. The final reason offered by Bing is that '"resource church" has become a loaded term' as 'a stereotypical view has developed that this is a purely evangelical initiative, which takes away resources from other churches locally, and several of the earlier and best-known examples seem to bear this out'.[35] The fundamental difference seems to be that 'resourcing churches' reflects a caution, hesitancy and fear about how the concept of 'resource churches' has been developed and implemented.

Many resource churches could also be described as 'megachurches', since, as Porter recognizes, growing large is one of the characteristics of resource churches.[36] However, it has been clearly stated by the Strategy and Development Unit alongside definitions that a resource church is 'not merely a large church'. It was pointed out in 2019 by *Megachurches and Social Engagement* that 'the now standard definition of a megachurch, based on the work of the Hartford Seminary Institute for Religion Research, is Protestant churches where more than 2000 people attend for the purposes of worship per week'. This book explores the implications of this definition originating in America, with Peter Brierley holding that a church of 400 in the UK is the equivalent of a church of 2000 in the USA, but decides to retain it because it provides a 'global size marker'.[37] The concept of megachurches, in contrast with resource churches, is simply about numbers of attendees rather than any kind of distinct role that a church plays.

The final term, 'minster church', reflects a historical model with which resource churches have become associated. Although there are similarities, clearly not all minster churches are resource churches in the sense that Thorpe and others have defined. For example, although part of the purpose of the cathedral in York, which has been known as a 'minster' since the eighth century, is 'to play an active role, across the Diocese of York and the Northern Province of the Church of England supporting the work of the Archbishop, sharing our skills and knowledge and working with communities and partners to further our mission',[38] this does not explicitly include church planting. The thesis that minster churches in Anglo-Saxon England were early examples of resource churches has been particularly developed by Nick Spencer.[39] This will be evaluated, alongside other narratives concerning the origins of resource churches, such as Porter's views on Antioch, in my subsequent article. The terms 'hub church', 'megachurch', 'resourcing church', and 'minster church' all relate to 'resource churches', but each of these terms have their own particular connotations and emphases. This indicates that the concept of resource churches is sufficiently distinctive that it should not be conflated with any of these, but instead requires its own definition. Thorpe's definition of resource churches, which attempts to resolve this need, can now be evaluated.

[35]Bing, *Resourcing Churches*, pp. 4-5.

[36]Sarah Dunlop identifies Holy Trinity Brompton as an Anglican megachurch in 'Anglican Megachurches: Transforming society one person at a time' (paper presented at the Megachurches and Social Engagement in London conference, November 2016).

[37]Mark Cartledge, Sarah Dunlop, Heather Buckingham and Sophie Bremner, *Megachurches and Social Engagement: Public Theology in Practice* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), p. 43.

[38]https://yorkminster.org/about-us/mission-statement-accounts-policies/ (accessed January 2023).

[39]Nick Spencer, *Parochial Vision: The Future of the English Parish* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2004).

Evaluation of Definition by Thorpe

By evaluating the five core elements from Thorpe's definition separately, it is possible to show that some of these components can largely be retained, while others need to be significantly amended. The first of these is that 'the bishop only can designate a church as a resource church because its calling and ministry goes beyond its own parochial boundaries'.[40] The concept of a church having a wider remit than its own parish is reliant on an administrative framework. This was introduced to the Church of England through the Dioceses Pastoral and Mission Measure in 2007, and the Mission and Pastoral Measure in 2011. This permitted pastoral reorganization, including the creating, uniting, altering or dissolving parishes, benefices, deaneries and archdeaconries. It also made allowance for the implementation of Bishop's Mission Orders which 'may include provision authorising a minister to exercise his or her ministry in any place'.[41] Before then, all schemes for pastoral reorganization had to be approved by the Queen acting on the advice of the Privy Council. In a biography of Rowan Williams, who was the Archbishop of Canterbury at the time of these changes, Andrew Goddard explains that this 'allowed bishops to facilitate cross-boundary and network patterns of church' and 'gave a framework for those with entrepreneurial and church-planting skills that kept them within Anglican structures and patterns of accountability'.[42] Although permission from a bishop is currently required in the Church of England for any church planting across parish boundaries, this does not entail that episcopal authorization should be intrinsic to the definition for all resource churches.

The inclusion of episcopal authorization as a core element of resource church begs the question of whether resource churches can only exist as part of an episcopal denomination. An example of the use of the term 'resource church' outside of episcopalian structures is Jubilee Church Maidstone, part of an international apostolic movement of churches called the Church of the Nations, who recognized in 2011 that they had become a resource church.[43] As seen in his seven characteristics of resource churches, Porter broadens the emphasis on accountability and cooperation. At the heart of Thorpe's concerns about this element of resource churches is the ability for resource churches to work effectively and strategically with church authorities. Perhaps instead of referring specifically to episcopal authorization, a definition of resource churches should refer more generally to working in healthy partnership with other churches. For episcopal authorization to be included in a definition, it is necessary, in addition to the episcopal perspective offered by Thorpe, to understand the view on this matter of those who are not bishops, as well as people beyond the Church of England.

The second core element is that resource churches are 'part of a diocesan strategy to evangelise a city or town and transform society'. This reflects a distinctive

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[40]Thorpe, *Resource Churches*, p. 24.

[41]https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2019-04/MPM%202011%20as%20in%20effect%2001032019.pdf (accessed January 2023).

[42]Andrew Goddard, *Rowan Williams: His Legacy* (Oxford: Lion Books, 2013), p. 58.

[43]http://legacymedia.jubilee.co/recordings/t201-20150930-Ross_Mundell-Session_24_The_Resource_Church-LTS_2015.mp3 (accessed January 2023).

theological understanding of mission, which it is not clear all resource churches share. Strategic planning became a critical component of commercial decision-making through pioneers in the 1950s–1960s, such as the business historian Alfred Chandler, who coined the popular definition that strategy is 'the determination of long-term goals and objectives of an enterprise and the adoption of courses of action and the allocation of resources necessary for carrying out those goals'.[44] Since then, ideas and tools from the discipline of strategic management have become widely utilized within non-profit organizations, including churches. Amit Shah *et al.*, however, point out that while 'an increasing number of churches and ministries are applying the principles of strategic planning', reasons for 'reluctance on the part of church leaders to adopt formal planning . . . include a lack of training in the planning process and a belief that planning is not biblical or indicates a lack of faith'.[45] Careful scrutiny is needed of the church's commitment to what Darrell Guder critiques as a 'theology of mission that propagates mission statements intended to function primarily as advertising slogans'.[46] Although it may not be clear that strategic planning should be adopted wholesale by the Church of England, it is intrinsic to a definition of resource churches, as every stage of the development of this concept reflects an intention of planning for growth.

In this core element of resource churches, evangelism takes centre stage. Accusations could be advanced of this presenting an imbalanced view, particularly in relation to the 'Five Marks of Mission', adopted by General Synod in 1996 as a summary of contemporary missionary endeavour. 'To proclaim the good news of the Kingdom' was referred to as 'personal evangelism' in a letter at the end of the Anglican Consultative Council in 1984 at which these Marks of Mission were introduced. This First Mark of Mission is described on the website for the worldwide Anglican Communion as 'a summary of what all mission is about, because it is based on Jesus' own summary of his mission'.[47] However, alongside personal evangelism, The Five Marks of Mission include nurturing disciples, practical caring, the struggle for justice, and responding to the ecological crisis,[48] none of which are mentioned explicitly in Thorpe's core elements of resource churches.

The example of HeartEdge, initiated with St Martin-in-the-Fields in 2017, provides an illuminating case study. This resource church initiative shows that resource churches do not need to be exclusively bound up with evangelism. Instead, HeartEdge is focused around 'Commerce: generating finance via enterprise, creatively extending mission, Culture: art, music, performance re-imagining the Christian narrative for the present, Congregation: inclusive liturgy, worship and common life, [and] Compassion: empowering congregations to address social need'.[49]

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[44]Alfred Chandler, *Strategy and Structure: Chapters in the History of the American Industrial Enterprise* (Washington DC: Beard Books, 1962), p. 13.

[45]Amit J. Shah, Fred R. David and Zigmont J. Surawski III, 'Does Strategic Planning Help Churches? An Exploratory Study', *The Coastal Business Journal* 2.1 (2003), p. 1.

[46]Darrell Guder, *Called to Witness: Doing Missional Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2015), p. 144.

[47]www.anglicancommunion.org/mission/marks-of-mission.aspx (accessed January 2023).

[48]Jesse Zink, 'Five Marks of Mission: History, Theology, Critique', *Journal of Anglican Studies* 15.2 (2017), pp. 144-66.

[49]www.heartedge.org/about-us/about-us (accessed January 2023).

In Thorpe's definition, a step towards placing evangelism within the context of a wider understanding of mission is taken by referring to the transformation of society. This is rooted in a theology of mission as transformation, which has become widespread since H. Richard Niebuhr identified 'Christ transforming culture' in 1951 as one of five different ways of approaching the relationship between the church and society.[50] Within the Church of England, it has become particularly popular through the work of former Bishop of Durham, N.T. Wright, who links this to eschatology, saying the resurrection, ascension and gift of the Spirit 'are designed not to take us away from the earth but rather to make us agents of the transformation of this earth'.[51] In order to assess whether focus on the transformation of society should be part of a definition, it is essential to find out through empirical research the extent to which the acceptance of a theology of mission as transformation is a feature of resource churches.

To explore the definition of the term 'resourcing churches', it has already been observed in this article that both receiving and giving resources are vital aspects of what it means to be a resource church. The reception of resources is in the foreground in the third core element from Thorpe's definition, and the provision of resources is the focus in the last of these elements. As a result of the connection between these elements, it is necessary to evaluate the fifth core element at this point rather than at the end. It stands out as a basic requirement that a resource church 'provides other resources for mission across their city or town'. This is far too vague, however, to clarify what distinguishes a resource church from any other kind of church. The Apostle Paul famously describes in 1 Corinthians 12 that every part of the body provides resources of which the rest of the body is needful. It has been demonstrated by alternative definitions from Bing and Porter that the reference to providing resources to a 'city' or 'town' may not even be relevant because a resource church may be found in a different location or environment or have a focus on a wider geographical region.

The process by which a resource church operates is spelled out more clearly by Thorpe in his third element. He describes that 'dioceses can increase and accelerate their capacity to plant by directing existing resources, most vitally appointing curates to them, in order to revitalise or plant a church, in time, from that original resource church'.[52] This acknowledges the development of an innovative approach to curacies in the Church of England. In London, Chartres helped to overcome restrictions to the number of curates that churches could employ, which he says 'were fuelled by a liberal distaste for charismatic evangelicalism and a conviction that the supply of curates should be evenly spread throughout the Diocese, irrespective of the capacity to pay'.[53] Criticisms of the church-planting model of curacy will be examined in a subsequent article, but it is evident from an overview of recent history that this has become an integral part of the resource church framework.

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[50]H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: HarperCollins, 1951).

[51]N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), p. 201.

[52]Thorpe, *Resource Churches*, p. 26.

[53]www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/speaking-and-writing/speeches/bishop-london-delivers-lambeth-lecture-church-growth-capital (accessed January 2023).

The third element also invites us to ask whether a resource church can exist merely by aspiration. Thorpe writes 'you could say that a resource church is only really functioning as a resource church once it has actually planted its first church'.[54] However, it is noteworthy that Thorpe suggests that to have already planted another church could be part of what it means to qualify as a resource church, but does not actually include this in his definition, as this indicates that he believes a resource church can exist without yet having planted. The wide usage of the term 'resource church' indicates that having already planted should not be required in a definition, as the name is often attributed before the stage of planting.

Issues of leadership training, as well as strategy, which have been explored in relation to other elements, are expanded upon in the fourth core element in Thorpe's definition. Thorpe states that resource churches 'actively develop a pipeline of leaders for further planting'.[55] The image of a pipe, in which transportation takes place from one location to another, reflects an instrumentalist perspective of humans as resources. This is similar to the way in which the appointment of curates has already been identified in this definition as the direction of a vital resource. It also suggests that the concept of resource churches is dependent upon a model of leadership that has only been developed around the turn of the millennium. Research by Walt Mahler on succession planning and the assessment of young leaders at General Electrics was popularized by Stephen Drotter, Ram Charan and James Noel in their book, *The Leadership Pipeline*, published in 2000. This recognized six critical career passages or 'pipeline turns' of leadership development, and dangers in each of these moments of transition.[56] Earlier references to resource churches predate the discovery of this 'pipeline' model, clearly indicating that, in sharp contrast with Thorpe's definition, the term 'pipeline' should not be used to define the concept of resource churches. Like the church-planting model of curacy, we will return to the 'leadership pipeline' model for further critique in the third article of this series. In the earliest stages of the emergence of the concept of resource churches, training and learning were understood more broadly. Breen described St Thomas's as a 'centre for teaching and training' and developed an approach to church growth in which learning communities, known as 'Huddles',[57] are central.[58] In Thorpe's article in 2015, 'learning communities' are mentioned explicitly and resource churches are regarded as being uniquely positioned to help explore 'wider issues, bringing together political, business, and charity leaders to discuss matters relevant to the church and nation'.[59] Thorpe's later definition, which we are evaluating here, did not include the core values, or reference to learning communities, from his preliminary framework. By narrowing its focus to church planting and evangelism, and the training of leaders for these, it loses emphasis

[54]Thorpe, *Resource Churches*, p. 25.

[55]Thorpe, *Resource Churches*, p. 26.

[56]Ram Charan, Stephen Drotter and James Noel, *The Leadership Pipeline: How to Build the Leadership-Powered Company* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001).

[57]Mike Breen, *Building a Discipling Culture: How to Release a Missional Movement by Discipling People like Jesus Did* (Greenville, SC: 3DM Publishing, 2009), pp. 21-38.

[58]Breen, *Discipling Culture*, pp. 113-21.

[59]Ric Thorpe, 'City Centre Resource Churches: A Guide', *Church Growth Resourcing Mission Bulletin* (June 2015).

on the values and culture of learning that earlier perspectives on resource churches believe fuel and sustain their mission.

Conclusion

Definitions of the term 'resource church' have not burst onto the scene out of nowhere but have developed over the past 25 years. Most notably this includes their first mention in Mike Breen's book in 1997; their inclusion in *Mission-Shaped Church* in 2004; and their increasing prevalence since the success of church-planting in London under the oversight of Chartres. These developments resulted in a definition formulated by Thorpe in 2020. Other recent definitions, including by Bing and Porter, have placed greater emphasis on the development of resource churches outside of city centres, values such as generosity, and relationships beyond the Church of England. This article has demonstrated the ways in which resource churches can be differentiated from the similar ideas of hub churches, mega-churches, minster churches and resourcing churches. In this way, the requirement for a separate definition has been evidenced. An exploration of these factors laid the foundation for an evaluation of Thorpe's definition with its current prominence in relation to church planting in the Church of England.

It has been shown that there are troubling problems with Thorpe's definition of the term 'resource church'. This definition restricts the concept of a resource church to the context of current legislative practice within the Church of England by referring to episcopal authorization and dioceses. It reflects an imbalanced view of mission, which is not characteristic of all resource churches. It also fails to place enough emphasis on values and culture of learning.

The need for revision and amendment, however, should not lead us to conclude that Thorpe's definition is unusable. Bing provided a complementary definition of market-town resource church and Porter has offered insights through his descriptions about resource churches. Thorpe, however, has uniquely formulated a definition that synthesizes the most important aspects of resource churches. His assertions that the resource church framework involves working with the wider church, strategic planning for mission, the receiving and giving of resources, and leadership development accurately reflect elements that are consistently present across resource churches. Thorpe's immense personal experience and insider knowledge as the 'Bishop of Church Planting' is also interpreted through his rich theological analysis. Thorpe seems to me to have established the best existing definition of the term 'resource church' in current literature. We can be confident that his definition will continue to aid and enhance our understanding of resource churches, even if it simply reflects the latest stage in the ongoing refinement of this concept. Due to the lacunae of evidence in the current research, 'resource church' is still a term in search of a precise meaning.

Most urgently, four areas have been identified in this article to require in-depth empirical study:

   (i) Comparison between the experiences of resource churches in differing settings, including large city-centre resource churches, mid-sized resource

churches in market towns, and rural beacon churches, would indicate whether, as Bing suggests, separate definitions are needed for each of these categories.

(ii) The role of calling and

(iii) the expression of generosity, unity, audacity, humility, festivity, and simplicity within the development and practice of resource churches may demonstrate that these should be included as part of a revised definition.

(iv) As part of Thorpe's core elements of resource churches, it is also necessary to ascertain the extent to which a theology of mission as transformation is reflected in the views, including the operant and espoused theologies, of those who are part of resource churches.

Although some questions about resource churches can only be answered by observing contemporary practice and belief, this article has illustrated that the existing body of literature about resource churches provides a foundation for these to be understood. In the second article in this series, the idea that resource churches have their precursors in models of early Christian congregational worship will be scrutinized; and in the third article, criticisms of the resource church model will be described and evaluated. In the tripartite structure of these articles, the matters of defining, locating origins and evaluating resource churches illuminate each other, leading to a better understanding of resource churches overall.