

relief work. This, she surmises, is a response to “the love of God in their lives”. The man with the bag of coins, who was not a church-goer, therefore represents an enigma for Maggie. I suggest there are many morally concerned people who don't have God in their lives:

MAGGIE: As you say, there are a tremendous number of good people who don't have a faith as such. I admire the Buddhists. They don't believe in God in the same way that we do. But they believe in nature and the humanity of nature if you like. So, I can understand where they are coming from. Catholics - I couldn't follow the way they worship - but I had some good Catholic friends. And I had friends in all sorts of religions and non-religions.

In her survey of parishioner's attitudes to the church, Kate distances herself from those whose hostility to the re-purposing of the church she feels was unreasonable. She puts a slightly mocking tone to their sense of “outrage” amid fears of “having drunks in the porch” and “weirdos in there”. Some claimed, “it's our church and why should we allow it to happen”. Others simply vowed to never come through the door again. With a note of incredulity, Kate recalls someone asking in a public meeting, “are you selling your soul to the Devil?”. She observes that “it's the ones who moan the most who never went to church anyway”. Kate identifies instead with a constituency of the village she terms the “oldies”. However, since this group also includes many who were unhappy with the internal changes to the church, Kate confesses to split loyalties.

KATE: But the other element is also the "oldies" which we're now part of, you know, we feel like we're dinosaurs and they want to push us out anyway; get rid of those people, come on. Suddenly they're such a pain in the neck. You know that's how people have been feeling. I've felt like it and I know when you talk to people they say well what's for us? The church isn't actually offering anything to anybody who've faithfully gone. You know, people have been faithful haven't they over the years. I always think of the generations past who have been faithful, prayed for that church.

Kate appears to be torn between the need for change and for continuity. In the end, she admits they found it impossible to “take sides”. She feels obliged to respect the attachment that many long-term residents have with St Peter's even if she can't understand their reasons. Kate is quick to affirm that it has been a part of their lives since they arrived in the village over forty years ago. But it has also been a place of

“frustration” and deep “sadness” too. They sum-up what it has meant to them personally:

KATE: I'm going to be buried there. And Bob's coming in with me. I think it means, I suppose in a funny sort of way - although I never thought I'd say it - it's a part of my life really.

The ‘church’ has been a significant part of Bob and Kate’s life together in Peterchurch for over forty years. They do not draw a sharp distinction between church and village as they retell their place-story to me in episodic detail. “I think the whole ethos of the village has always encouraged us”, Kate adds, “I don’t think it is just St Peter’s...they’re generous people in this village.” Like Maggie, Bob and Kate associate St Peter’s with great friendships and a profound experience of welcome which is inseparable from their sense of belonging in Peterchurch.

HOW TO READ A CHURCH

The three vignettes presented above begin to reveal different understandings of St Peter's. Each participant offers a different narrative. Maggie talks about fitting-in and adjustment, finding new ways to participate and belong. Sara talks eloquently about the immediate experience of a creative energy that may be encountered spatially in performative and social forms. Bob and Kate provide an insightful commentary on shifting relationships with the 'church' in village life. This place-talk reveal themes implicated in each participant's sense of place: (a) an 'existential' meaning; (b) authenticity and alienation; and (c) difference and change.

The regular members of the worshipping congregation display a notable reluctance to ascribe too much significance, or express an attachment to, St Peter's merely as a building. Bob laments people's interest in "dead stones" rather than joining-in a "living church", as Maggie puts it. Church-goers are careful to point out the 'church' is primarily its people. Nevertheless, the ambiguity of the polysemic meaning of 'church' serves a pragmatic purpose. Its 'both/and' meaning asserts an indissoluble link between its physical-spatial historicity and the life-stories of the faithful, past and present. St Peter's enfolds the life-stories of its religious participants in its place-history. Maggie insists this makes it more than "just" history. St Peter's is therefore an important physical symbol of their Christian identity and of the faithful that have gone before them. For these believers, God is the 'original' author of their Christian lives and, consequently, of the true meaning of 'church'. Consequently, they struggle to understand why the building should mean so much to those who don't share their faith.

Paul Ricoeur (1981) asserts that a text is a discourse fixed by writing. As a 'text' that can be read and understood, a place is also fixed by its inscriptions: the physical architecture, symbols, and representations that mediate meaning in changing contexts (Jenz 2017). While discussing options for the proposed café, the architect responsible for the design of the internal re-ordering provides an illuminating theological commentary for the project team concerning the ritual space and its material symbols.

As we re-trace the steps taken by participants in the rite of Holy Communion, Simon invites us to step beyond the altar rail to admire the Saxon stone altar. A member of the project staff, who is not a church-goer, remarks uneasily that she rarely ventures this far into the sanctuary, having assumed she was not “allowed” to cross the threshold. The architect shares his own re-interpretation of the space. After pausing at the altar, we turn to look back at the square module that houses the kitchen at the far end of the Nave and creates the mezzanine level access to the public library beyond (Image 5). This, he says, he intended to mirror the square stone Saxon altar at the eastern end. Reminding us of the liturgy to “go in peace to love and serve the Lord”, the conclusion of the rite and subsequent departure back into the everyday world marks the completion of a symbolic journey, rather like a pilgrimage (Gothoni 1993). According to his ‘reading’ there has been no division of liturgical space into “church” and “centre”, it remains - in theological and symbolic terms - an integrated whole. Moreover, the architect has ascribed a new significance to its latest inscription. The ‘second altar’, he suggests, addresses a sort of liturgical imbalance by symbolising the sacredness of everyday life.



IMAGE 5: A NEW INSCRIPTION: THE ‘SECOND ALTAR’.

(Source: personal collection)

The *performance* of worship is a synthesis of the 'given' religious-cultural meanings as a 'place of worship' and its 'existential' meaning for individual believers. For Bob, Kate and Maggie a strictly liturgical reading of the "holy space" is incomplete. Like a structural or linguistic analysis of a text, a purely spatial or material account offers an explanation of the symbolic space but doesn't necessarily insure an adequate *understanding* of the place (Ricoeur 1981). One can learn to read a church objectively through an exegesis of its embodied internal sign system (Taylor 2003), its object-related authenticity embodied in its architecture and symbols (Wang 1999). But, according to Bob, the "church psychology" surrounding its material culture misses its deeper significance. For the members of the worshipping congregation, the liturgical space has an existential authenticity because of the presence of God in their lives made possible by Christ's sacrifice. This is the primary meaning of 'church' enacted and celebrated in Holy Communion.

Second, the textuality of place opens a distance between the social-historical-linguistic context of a prior 'author' (or architect), or previous re-interpretations, and that of the present 'reader' (Jenz 2017, Ricoeur 1981). This means it can achieve a degree of autonomy that permits new 'readings'. But, contrary to Chidester and Linenthal (1995), the potentially contested meanings of St Peter's (as 'church', 'centre' or 'Hub') have little to do with its status as a sacred space. There is nothing to suggest in the ethnographic data 'contestation' over the legitimate *ownership* of sacred symbols. But some participants do express concerns over the legitimate *authorship* of St Peter's place-story. The question posed to me on a number of occasions, "where's Christ in it?", refers to the *authority* of a Christian tradition that is assumed to govern its reinterpretation in every historical context up to the present.

Equally, the textuality of St Peter's may result in alienation if the place doesn't "speak to me". As a liturgical space, St Peter's can be experienced authentically in the "individuality" of a personal encounter with God in worship. Sara's experience of Anglican worship as a child, however, didn't "reach" or "affect" her. Church buildings were non-places. She describes instead a phenomenologically lived experience of togetherness and an "energy" at St Peter's during the performance of African music that "speaks to people". This granted the event a personal significance she evaluates as

“spiritual”. But this is a quite different ‘authentic experience’ to that described by Maggie. For Sara and her friend, the event may have expressed a truer sense of self in a liminal space with others, rather like that of a tourist as suggested by Wang (1999). It is an episode that may or may not be significant to the construction of one’s narrative identity. For members of the congregation, on the other hand, the performance of worship is unambiguously ‘existentially’ authentic in the context of their whole lives; a faith story in which they construct their ‘true’ identity as Christians.

Finally, participants acknowledge a diversity of ‘interests’ and understandings of ‘church’. The various typologies proposed in these terms reflect the perceived fragmentation of social identities in village life. In different ways, Maggie, Kate and Bob are grappling with the implications of alternative ‘readings’ of church. A tension resides in their fervent wish to welcome the stranger to St Peter’s while, at the same time, preserving a distinctive Christian place-identity.

The three narratives reveal differing interpretations of a space newly exposed to a shifting socio-cultural environment. New modes of participation invite new perspectives. The ethnographic narratives that follow introduce these new participants and the different ways they find they can belong. To those already discussed, their narratives add themes of self-expression, a distaste for organised religion, and a moral sensibility that recall those traced by Charles Taylor (2007) in *A Secular Age*. For some new participants, 'secular' use of St Peter's represents an exciting new opportunity. For others, it poses a direct challenge to the inherited meanings and principal place-identity of St Peter's as a 'church'. By way of a parable, Bob offers an insight into what Bob called "the secular process" underway at St Peter's:

BOB: While I was a hospice chaplain, basically, and one of the most riveting papers I ever read I think was by two senior nurses and the heading was - and this was about the hospice movement - "the secularisation of an ideal". And over the ten years that I've been in the hospice movement, it began for me as a flagship Christian enterprise. And when I came out of the hospice movement, the palliative care discipline had taken over the movement and so this caused these deeply-thinking nurses to write this article. And I've just been feeling over the last few years I've been in ministry there's been this creeping secularisation of, let's call it the church, the building and everything that goes on in there. And I haven't really been able to express it except that, you know, I have felt that for some reason things have perhaps been taken over a little bit by what one might call the secular process.

Referring to its role as a community space, Bob explains, "I think it always advertised itself and set it up as a secular project". Careful to acknowledge the "incredible work" that had gone into it, Bob wonders whether that "at the heart, the touchstone of it", its secular identity has been "a very slight shroud over what could happen." Bob discerns "a sort of irony that almost the first two things through the door, so to speak, were Tai Chi and Yoga". The secular identity of 'The Hub' is also a touchstone issue for Sara. After a short documentary video about the Hub was produced by the Diocese of Hereford, she was particularly upset by the finished work. Her remarks to camera that the project was "secular" has been carefully edited out.

SARA: I felt they had broken my trust. Because I had very, very, very, very... The only stipulation... I made a stipulation, under the only circumstance I would be interviewed for it, was that they made it crystal clear within that thing that the words 'this is not a religious' or 'this is secular'. 'Not religious' is a much better than 'secular' because people get awfully confused. That it had to say that. And it didn't. So, it broke my trust. It is absolutely essential with every letter capital letter, bold print and underlined that's the Hub project, its identity, is secular. It has to be. It is absolutely essential.

The video was, as far as Sara is concerned, not only inaccurate but inauthentic. It neither reflected her self-identity, the place-identity she believes 'The Hub' offers its participants, or the work she and her team had put into creating it. Sara feels a responsibility, a custodianship, over The Hub's identity. The project has implicitly made a promise to people who might not, in other circumstances, enter a church building. The promise, is, in effect, that you do not have to be religious to belong here. The project's secular identity owes much to the creative process that Sara believes has gone into the production of a new social space. According to Sara, The Hub is the result of team effort channelling a spiritual energy. Its constituent parts were "magnetically attracted" as it emerged "organically". Moreover, the Hub's aesthetic "speaks" of a place-identity in a language people can understand and *respond* to:

SARA: I do have an aesthetic eye. So, it does matter hugely to me what it looks like. Once it has started, once the component parts start to be put together, I could see what else needed to happen. To make it. Whether it was plants on the table or some more fairy lights, or the lectern with the blackboard on it. And I am still a bit controlling about it that on Tuesday I will do the flowers and the plants, and I will cast my eye over it and make sure that it works the way I want it to look. And then, I just knew that there had to be website. It was very important that our branding, our visuals, our wholeness of being connected, that we had to have that; that all those things created an actual place. The kind of thing that people could really identify with. And it was just one of those things that I do this and then I do this and then I do this. It did feel quite channeled, really.

Drawing on her education in fine art and a former career in marketing, Sara talks authoritatively about the "brand values" that make The Hub "inviting". The brand, she explains, has a "higher purpose" because it is "bringing people together". She explains that the rebranding of the St Peter's Centre as The Hub was about making a new identity:

SARA: We respond to the visuals and branding so powerfully. We had no idea how powerfully we are responding to them. We don't analyse it, we just *are* responding. We just endlessly - on an hourly, daily basis - *are* responding to brand

and brand identity. It is that identity it conjures inside us. It creates our identity. We are relating to that identity. I wear, I dunno, Nudie jeans, because I am this sort of person, so I am going to become more of this sort of person. Because I am relating to that brand. So, it is a really significant thing what happens to us.

If a brand can “create our identity”, as Sara suggests, then I wonder whether it may also express values that people can share:

SARA: Yeah. Yes! All of it is. It can be used as a force for good. And it can be used as a force for bad. We can be very unconscious of the power it has over us. I remember when I worked in advertising pedalling Pepsi to kids and getting people to use MasterCard and staring at screens for PlayStation, which were the brands I worked on. Part of my spiritual awakening was that I can't do that. That's wrong. It is morally inappropriate. But what I realised is that you can use it for good. And this is the thing: it can be used to good or it can be used for bad. And this is using it for real good because people do have a very strong relationship with it...Everything has an effect on people. I want to be in this place because it looks nice. I want to be in this place is because it's very welcoming. It all ties something together into a cohesive place.

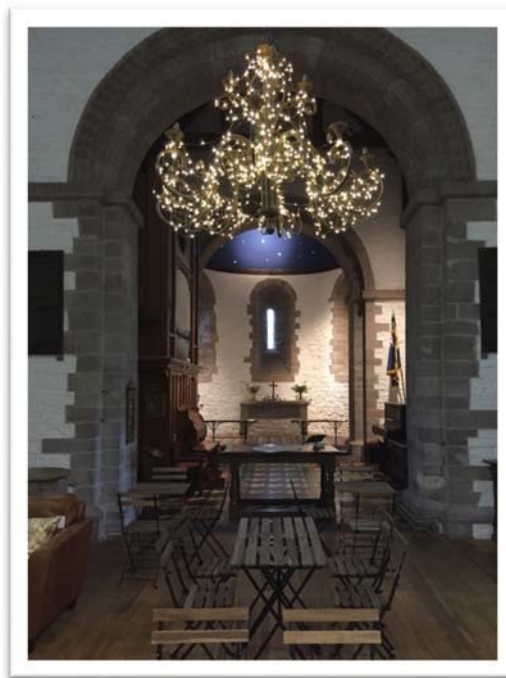


IMAGE 6: BISTRO TABLES ADJACENT TO THE 'HOLY TABLE' AND THE ILLUMINATED ALTAR BEYOND

(Source: Personal collection)

Sara believes that the “church’s brand has become its big problem”. The Hub brand, conversely, is something that people can relate to and identify with. The visual appearance of the café, as well as the website and other communications, constitute The Hub ‘brand’ identity. How people respond to it may, she suggests, produce a revised understanding of “place”. The Hub, Sara insists, must be a ‘secular’ space that does not embody or represent religious beliefs. Instead, the café appropriates ‘sacred space’ as a numinous backcloth. It has been sympathetically staged using bistro chairs and tables, aged brown leather sofas, an old counter top and a large antique chandelier festooned with fairy lights. African music plays quietly in the background. Café customers respond positively to the creative attention Sara and the project team have given to the space and articulate an aesthetic place-discourse. Figure 3 describes the frequency of ‘key themes’ Hub users employ in their postcard responses. They comment approvingly on the beauty of the building, the light coming through the stained glass, its peacefulness, and its sacred quality. Hub users frequently use words such as “warmth”, “atmosphere”, and “beautiful” to describe their experience (Table 1). They applaud especially the “welcome” they receive from the “friendly” staff and volunteers. It is a place to “meet” and make new “friends”.

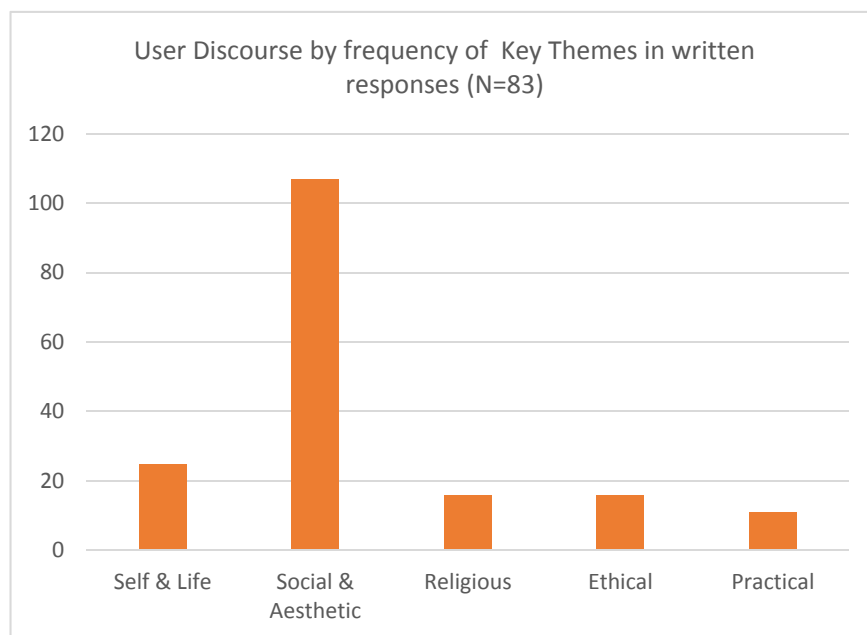


FIGURE 3: ANALYSIS OF KEY THEMES IN USER’S WRITTEN ‘POSTCARD’ RESPONSES

(Source: author)

| Key Words | Frequency |
|---------------------|-----------|
| Friend / Friendly | 49 |
| Place | 32 |
| Welcome / welcoming | 29 |
| Lovely | 27 |
| Church | 26 |
| Food | 24 |
| Meet / meeting | 23 |
| Hub | 23 |
| Warm | 21 |
| Community | 16 |
| Atmosphere | 15 |
| Wonderful | 13 |

TABLE 1: FREQUENTLY RECURRING WORDS IN USER DISCOURSE (N=83)

(Source: author)

Despite the extensive re-branding, the discourse of Hub users reveals an ambiguous rather than strictly non-religious place-identity. ‘The Hub’ brand has not inscribed an entirely new set of place-meanings over its received social meaning as a place of worship. Rather, users express an awareness of the religious heritage of the café setting. They perceive a certain playfulness with which the ordinary and everyday has been accommodated in a recognisably religious setting, giving a new twist to a “church”. Some employ a religiously-toned aesthetic to their experience of the café - for example, by describing it as a “spiritual” space. Only one respondent commented approvingly on its “non-religious” aspect:

A HUB USER: I mainly use the church for the children's play group on Thursday mornings and the café. I feel that these are great community spaces as I have met people from the area I otherwise wouldn't have. There is a friendly and welcoming atmosphere. The food at the café is fantastic and reasonably priced. These services along with the "community larder" and others have brought immense value to the church and village. The non-judgmental and non-religious side has brought it a new dimension to the church. Being non-religious myself I feel welcome here. Adapt to survive!

While visiting the café and learning more about the project, another café customer drew a sharp contrast with a baptism service she had recently attended at St Peter's. The latter she couldn't understand but claimed enthusiastically of the former, "I really get this!". A newcomer to the village values the opportunity it provides to meet people and make new friends without any reference to its religious purpose:

A HUB USER: It's a good place to meet people - being new to the village The Hub has provided us with a way to get to know people and make new friends as well as having a lovely café to bring friends and family when they visit.

Conversely, two participants at a monthly lunch club for the elderly appreciate the services offered by The Hub but nevertheless perceive an unresolved "tension":

A HUB USER: [I visited St Peter's] for their monthly lunch. The church is unbelievably different from when I first knew it nearly 30 years ago, with tables and chairs instead of pews and warm enough on a cold day. People were coming and going from the café and it felt a place of welcome and hospitality and God was in that. It has become a meeting place for the village but I recognise a tension in myself and some in the village for the loss of their church as a sacred space, a place to come apart and to pray.



IMAGE 7: EVERYDAY COMMUNION: THE HUB CAFÉ IN OPERATION

(Source: personal collection)

A HUB USER: About 35 of us met for a very jolly lunch in the former nave and I noticed that the Hub Café was still functioning - so it is proving to be a good way to meet old friends and make new ones - especially for newcomers. I am still sad that all the old pews were taken out as that does make a difference to the general 'feel' of the building - not so church-like as in the past. Some of the older parishioners have still not recovered from what they feel was a desecration of a beloved building. In thirty years' time, if the Church is still open, perhaps we oldies will be dead!

The Hub Café can, as Sara insists, speak to people. But its message has no propositional content as such; the aesthetic does not speak *about* something but, like an abstract artwork, speaks *of*. As Paul Ricoeur (1981) might put it, it doesn't project a world or invite an interpretation of what Gadamer (1975) calls the matter of the text.

Communicating sensuous or felt values, the "atmosphere" sets a mood for the social activities facilitated by the space. Although 'The Hub' provides convivial setting for being-with, it is the social interactions themselves that make the place meaningful for its users. As a stage for the event of the Other, it might be described as a space for a 'secular' communion.

A BEAUTIFUL HARMONY?

Sara wants to uphold the freedom of Hub users to respond in their own way to an inclusive and welcoming social space. Bob does too. He describes how people may respond freely to a 'storied' place and talks earnestly about the "transforming" power of the gospel in people's personal stories of faith. In his typically thoughtful and reflective way, Bob recalls the message given by a notable theologian at a seminar he attended. The "crisis of modernity", he suggested, posed a "huge challenge" for Christians. Consequently, Bob suggests a "beautiful harmony" could be achieved between 'church' and 'centre'. He explains:

BOB: Yes, the café is, I think, wonderful. I often go over there and sit down; it's amazing who you meet and speak to and enjoy the lovely coffee and the cake and so on. But for there to be the availability of, not necessarily tracts, but that we wouldn't be afraid to have a Bible on the chair or even on the Holy table, which would be lovely. That's what I'm thinking.

Chatting in the cosy lounge of his cottage, Bob is eager to show me a Church of England booklet he had just received. It explains, he says, that people don't become Christians because they aren't given the opportunity. Bob says he is challenged by the booklet's appeal for these "new initiatives" to lay "pathways for people to faith." Café Churches, he says, are "fantastic". But the booklet offers "a template for how it can be done by retaining the beauty of the Christian gospel at its heart." Offering a "positive note" on the community space opened up within St Peter's, Bob says he was particularly delighted to be "invited or allowed" to have an exhibition of his paintings at The Hub. His collection of water colours was entitled "The A to Z of the Kingdom of Heaven", a project Bob had worked on for years.

BOB: I had such a wonderful response, really, and I did try to get there most mornings and have a coffee at The Hub and talk to people and perhaps sell a few cards or whatever. And that was...for me very uplifting because my paintings were gospel-based, and people responded to them. So, it's been absolutely wonderful; there have been wonderful openings via The Hub and the community facility.

According to Bob churches have always been "repositories of the most incredible art". I ask whether the Christian content of the art is important. Kate responds:

KATE: There's no sort of Christian...We sometimes take those 'Words for the Day' just to - we always have them delivered - we put one or two in there, but they always seem to disappear. Whether someone takes them or whether they get chucked in the bin we're not quite sure. It would be nice to have some Christian music playing at the same time as it was on. I know they sometimes have their own music. But it would be nice if someone had some kind of initiative to put something on quietly in the background. It doesn't have to be hymns, it could be any sort of pop-gospel music.

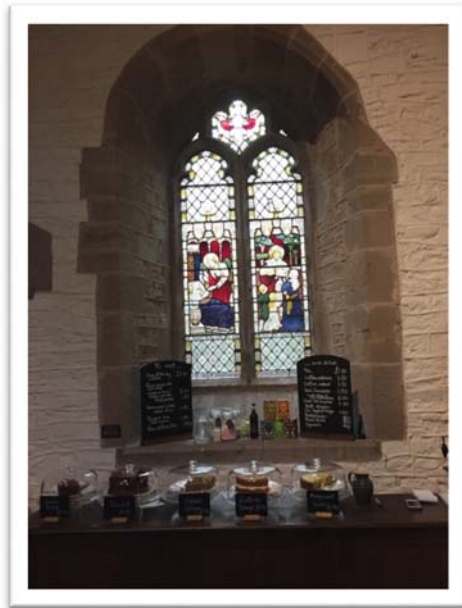


IMAGE 8: STAINED GLASS BACKDROP TO THE CAFÉ COUNTER

(Source: personal collection)

Bob's appeal for a "harmony" that retains the "beauty of the gospel" is not intent on reclaiming "holy space" set apart exclusively for traditional liturgical practice. Instead, representations of Christ and the gospel in scripture, texts, art or music or shared life-stories invite people to "respond". Their effect, it seems, is to make Christ and his message present. By affirming Christ, the author of faith, "in this", the passive but overt presence of these symbols thereby *authorises* the community use of liturgical space as continuous with its received place-story. Sara, however, is very wary of what she detects is a "hidden agenda" that would "totally, completely, profoundly" betray user's trust. She objects especially to what she calls "missioning" as unnecessary and entirely misplaced at The Hub. It means "thinking you need to be actively, regularly worshipping Jesus" and "persuading people to become part of an ideology":

SARA: I come from a line of missionaries so... But I think there can be a bit of a kind of 'lead people in' and then start 'missioning' them. And I don't agree with it because I just don't think that it is necessary. Because you don't need to bring people in to be part of a club. They are already in that club because they are already connecting with people. They don't have to start worshipping Jesus because they are already part of Jesus. They don't need to have that. What we do in the Hub is probably exactly what he said. But he didn't say you have to worship me in order to feel connected to other people. He just said be connected to other people and love them. So, I don't like missioning because I don't even think that Jesus would

have given a damn, to be honest. I think he would have just said, 'brilliant you are looking after people and loving each other. Job done'.

Well aware of the challenges facing a church with a small and ageing congregation, Sara fully respects the religious function of St Peter's. This, she insists, will always take precedence over The Hub. But the practice of worship is unnecessary for Hub users. She insists on a place-identity for The Hub that articulates values commensurate with Christianity but not with an exclusively Christian self-identity. Thus, a "place-congruent" place-identity can be shared by Hub users and church-goers alike (Twigger-Ross and Uzell 1996). A shared "place-referent" continuity of self-identity is a more difficult prospect. Whose story does the place tell? The place-meanings to which church members refer are inseparable from their self-concept as those with "God in their lives". What concerns Sara is the authenticity of people's experience at The Hub; insuring they are agents of the perception of their own meaningful environment (1996). Thus, Hub users should not be expected to "join a club" but be free to walk their own spiritual paths in order to connect with something bigger than themselves:

SARA: They don't need to go to a church on Sunday. This is me being very bold here. I feel a huge compassion for the church as well. They need to keep their congregations going. So, I feel a bit harsh saying that. But for me, I don't need to go to church on Sunday. I need to go for a walk or I need to do a kind thing, or I might do some drawing, or I need to be around people I love or just be kind and caring. Just do those things. Go and do them. But I also totally respect that people like my uncle find it incredibly comforting and that they do really connect with the Holy Spirit through that medium. So, go for your life if it works for you. But converting people or having that agenda is something that I feel uncomfortable with.

As far as Sara is concerned, users of The Hub are very sensitive to a "missioning" agenda and would be quick to notice one. As a consequence, a proposal to use of the Hub brand to publicise a new format of 'café church' on a Sunday drew a red line for Sara:

SARA: So, when Simon wanted it to call his new Sunday's service, "Hub Bistro", I was prepared to walk out of my job rather than back down on that one. And Simon and I had a dingdong about it. Not a big one because we get on great. But I was absolutely, under no circumstances, in any form going to let him call his church service "Hub Bistro". Ever.

The harmony Bob alludes to resembles what Chidester & Linenthal (1995) term a merging of spatial relations, or a hybridisation of sacred space. He is advocating a creative reinterpretation of the space that retains a continuity with its cultural-religious heritage. Sara, on the other hand, strongly opposes the confusion of The Hub with a “church” she conceives as an institution. Her critique of ideology is aimed at the “dogma” of what she calls a “stuck tradition”. The social space created by The Hub, on the other hand, challenges a dominant order by re-imagining the space as a site for the practice of everyday life. Thus, as a lived space or third space (Lefebvre 1991, Soja 1996), the Hub creates a new unity of the imagined and real. Bob’s ‘beautiful harmony’ is an alternative ‘thirthing’ through the spatial unity of creative and traditioned space. It is the production of meaningful space that speaks *about* something. Thus, Christ is the propositional ‘truth’ content of St Peter’s place-meaning. For Sara, Christ is an exemplar of what The Hub speaks *of* - an authentic spirituality of self-expression, being-with and loving the other. In different ways, both invite participants to respond to the place, make it their own, and feel they belong.

LOVING THY NEIGHBOUR

Unlike café customers and church-goers, volunteers in the community project at St Peter’s do not refer primarily to its aesthetics or its existential significance as a place of worship (see Figure 4). From the standpoint of a volunteer, St Peter’s creates opportunities for meaningful social activity. They articulate both place-making and self-making goals, such as a sense of fulfilment or accomplishment. Like users of The Hub, volunteering is an opportunity to “meet” people and make “friends”. But volunteers also make frequent use of other-regarding terms and identify with a collective. The word “community” is by far the most frequently used in their reflectively written responses (Table 2). They describe “helping” and “contributing” to “the community”. At the same time, the reasons they offer for doing so are often supplied with an autobiographical context. Volunteers may have reached a certain stage in life, such as retirement, want to keep or acquire skills, or have lost a spouse and become lonely.

More generally, volunteers contextualise their own lives with the “life of the village”. Through their ‘emplotment’ (Mattingly 1998) in a shared life-story, they can hope to meet their self-needs by helping to address the needs of others. In so doing, they are both active members and agents of “community”. The comment below is a typical response to the question of ‘why’ people volunteer at St Peter’s:

A VOLUNTEER: I knew that once I had retired I wanted to do some volunteering work in the village. It would enable me to get to know more people locally, what was going on and to give something to the community. Village life is very important and being part of it and giving to it has meant a lot to me.

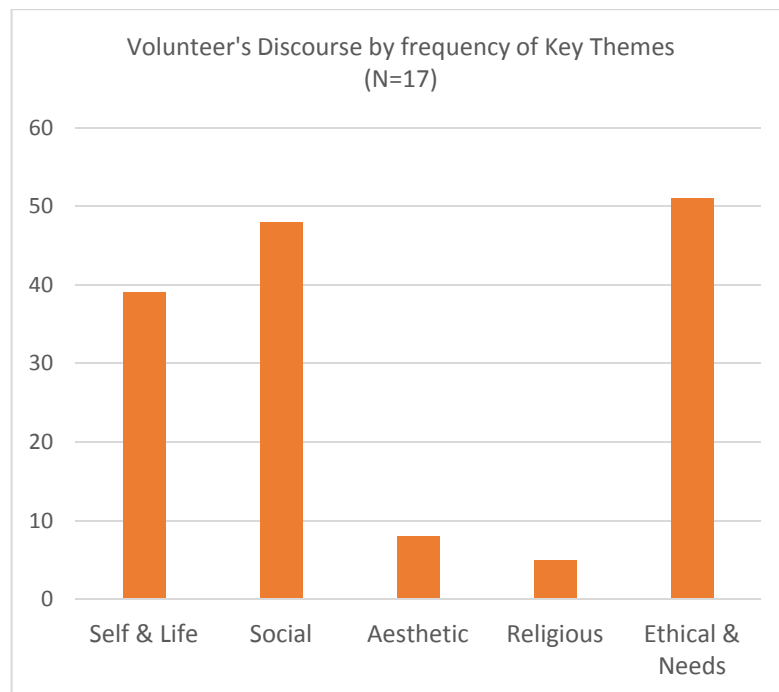


FIGURE 4: ANALYSIS OF KEY THEMES IN VOLUNTEER’S WRITTEN RESPONSES

(Source: author)

| Key Words | Frequency |
|-------------------|-----------|
| Community | 30 |
| Meet / Meeting | 19 |
| Place | 16 |
| Help / Helping | 16 |
| Friend / Friendly | 15 |
| Life | 12 |
| Church | 14 |
| Village | 11 |
| Need(s) | 8 |
| Team | 7 |

TABLE 2: FREQUENTLY RECURRING WORDS IN VOLUNTEER'S DISCOURSE (N=17)

(Source: author)

In their narrative responses, volunteers are content to label St Peter's a "church", although only five of the seventeen regular volunteers who participated in the research drew attention to its religious function. One very active volunteer and event organiser told me, "I have never spent so much time in a church and I'm an atheist!". Each of the other four participants suggest a compatibility between its religious purpose and "everyday" life (below).



IMAGE 9: VOLUNTEERS SERVING IN THE HUB CAFÉ

(Source: personal collection)

A VOLUNTEER: St Peter's is where I have worshipped for nearly 40 years and has always meant a lot to me. I have been a PCC member for nearly all that time and I'm keen to keep the church vibrant and up to date and willing to accept changes in our life and the life of the church.

A VOLUNTEER: It is the most significant building in the valley and has been for hundreds of years. It still is a central place for the community for traditional church functions BUT is more part of everyday lives - a busier place altogether than previously. It feels warm and alive.

A VOLUNTEER: I am not a churchgoer, but I think it is important to keep a hub, whether the church or the café, going for the community, something that is sadly lacking in the towns (London). I think that when a 'townie' (like me) moves to the countryside they should embrace what it has to offer and participate as much as possible.

A VOLUNTEER: Using the church as a centre is a way of keeping a wonderful building used and preserved. It's a beautiful space for people to spend time in and I think this is important for the people who visit. Personally, I love the continuity a church gives to a community and welcome its changes in usage although I think it's important to remember its main function too.

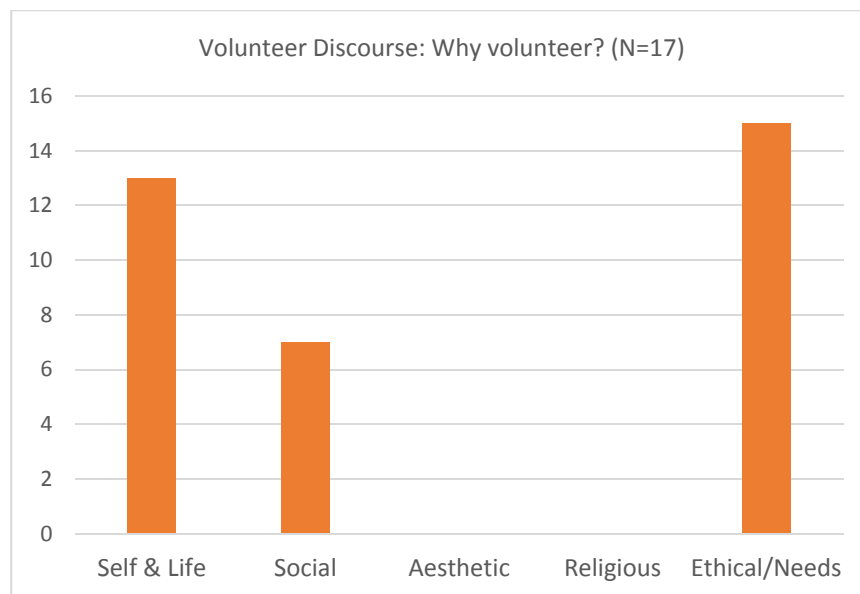


FIGURE 5: ANALYSIS OF KEY THEMES IN VOLUNTEER'S WRITTEN RESPONSES

(Source: author)

As illustrated in Figure 5, none of the 17 regular volunteers refer to aesthetic or religious aspects of the place, or to a personal faith, as their motivation for volunteering at St Peter's. Neither do these feature in their description of the difference St Peter's has made to their lives or that of the community. The discourse of volunteers instead discloses a third constellation of place-meanings one might call strictly 'ethical' rather than religious.

DISCUSSION

In the preceding ethnographic narratives, people talk in their own words about St Peter’s. Their senses of place and belonging are disclosed in discursive themes that correspond to the different ways in which they participate. Table 3 summarises three key themes that emerge from these place narratives. While they suggest different perspectives, alternative ways to belong, they are not necessarily fixed or mutually exclusive. As my own mode of participation changed, so did my sense of St Peter’s as a place. Tasked initially with developing a ‘community development’ project, I shared primarily in the ‘ethical’ discourse of a volunteer wishing to make a difference to village life. But ‘change’ trips off the tongue easily for a newcomer. Such talk is inevitably confronted by the effective history of a storied place that invites its reinterpretation (Gadamer 1975). Moreover, my understanding of St Peter’s certainly evolved as other participants shared their place-stories with me.

| Discourse | Form | Content | Participants | Key Themes |
|-----------|---------|-----------------------------|--------------|--|
| Religious | Story | “God in our Lives” | Congregation | The story of God in people’s lives and/or continuity of social and self-identities |
| Ethical | Text | “Community”, the Self/Other | Volunteers | Emplacement in a social entity; meeting the needs of self and other |
| Aesthetic | Artwork | Felt values | Hub Users | Social-aesthetic responses: welcome, warmth, beauty and friendship |

TABLE 3: PLACE DISCOURSES IDENTIFIED IN ETHNOGRAPHIC DATA

(Source: author)

In Wittgenstein’s terms, a discourse is a social practice, a language-game played by an interpretive community. It is inevitably governed by linguistic norms conditioned by a

socio-historical context, the inherited traditions that establish a horizon to our understandings (Gadamer 1975). Each of our interpretations are subject to presuppositions or what Gadamer called prejudices (1975). What a place means to 'me' or 'us' is inescapably conditioned by the interpretive tradition we each inhabit. To suggest that we shape and are shaped by places is to say that 'belonging' is a two-way process of 'fitting-in'. It is a dialogue between 'given' socio-cultural place-meanings, and our place-referent sense of self, our situated self-interpretation (see Figure 1.). As a consequence, much of the place-talk narrated by participants at St Peter's is autobiographical. When invited to talk about 'place', participants often share stories about themselves. Research participants make sense of place through life-stories retold in narrative episodes (Linde 1993). The narrative structure of their self-concepts insures that place-meaning and identity are tightly interwoven. But the process of 'fit', our way of belonging, is always negotiated within a context which may differ from person to person in a plural, even secular, society. The aesthetic, ethical and religious discourses of place recall the three 'spheres of existence' proposed by Søren Kierkegaard (1964), the nineteenth century 'father of existentialism'. Broadly consistent with Wittgenstein's 'forms of life', in Kierkegaard's philosophical anthropology the 'spheres' correspond to relations of selfhood that propel human becoming forwards by 'repetition' rather than 'recollection' (Kierkegaard 2004, also Carlisle 2005, Evans 2009). Anthropologist Matt Tomlinson (2014) has explored how ideas penned by Kierkegaard's pseudonymous authors may help to resolve a familiar dilemma: whether the advent of Christianity occasions a continuity or discontinuity in socio-cultural meanings and identities (Cannell 2006, Robbins 2007). Bob describes a "secular process" that raises the same issues in the reverse direction and prompts believers to ask, "where's Christ in all this?".

Interpretations of place are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Most participants at St Peter's are content to affirm its meanings both as 'church' and as a public space - and identify positively with both. Indeed, as one respondent suggests "God is in" the welcome people receive at The Hub Café. Some members of the congregation have become enthusiastic café customers and volunteers at The Hub. On the other hand, the place discourses may disclose alternative 'readings' of St Peter's along a spectrum of participation and belonging (Jenkins 2004). Consequently, participants may legitimately

arrive at incommensurable understandings of place. A member of the worshipping congregation and a regular user of the Hub Café may both feel they belong but each in a different way. Moreover, either may fail to understand the meanings assigned by the other. As Kate said, “I don’t understand why it means so much to people”.

Even if we end up with different constructs, the social construction of place is nonetheless achieved by discourse. For those sharing a religious discourse, St Peter’s “stands for” or signifies the story of God in the lives of the faithful. For other parishioners too, St Peter’s secures the “continuity of their lives” by publicly staging significant narrative episodes in their life-stories: weddings, baptisms and funerals - and perhaps concerts. In this interpretive tradition, St Peter’s place-meaning is a ‘given’ by a common-sense and informs one’s situated identity. For those whose life-stories are not (yet) deeply woven into its place-story, interpretations are less likely to satisfy what we may call a ‘continuity condition’. Unlike the “oldies”, newcomers are apt to reverse the direction of ‘fit’, projecting place meaning as an expression of their ‘authentic’ self in the aesthetic art of place-making.

The community project at St Peter’s has been a lingering source of tension for some since its inception. It has the appearance at least of an intergenerational gap. Newcomers are perceived by longstanding residents to be more willing to ‘author’, create and accept change that some consider an effacement of inherited meanings and arouses suspicions of a conflict of “interest” (or else disinterest). Older residents concede that, with time, change will be freed from the constraint of continuity. The “dinosaurs” will be extinct. The ‘church’ will be finally squeezed out. The secularisation process will be complete. In the meantime, alternative place meanings and identities have been accommodated at St Peter’s by spatializing them or conceiving difference in spatial terms. Thus, St Peter’s can be a place of worship on Sunday *and* a cafe on Tuesday. It is a church *and* a community hub. But not in the same space at the same time. Different place-related meanings and identities are thereby safely confined to separate spatio-temporal compartments.

The arrival of the Hub Café, therefore, disrupted this delicate arrangement. It crossed and blurred spatial and hermeneutic boundaries. For some it further jeopardised the

continuity between past and present represented by a ‘church’ progressively being pushed out. The displacement felt by these, often older, members of the village reflects a sense of lost continuity with their past; a loss of place-identity. But, with time, The Hub may create a space where place-identities can be formed and affirmed in a different way, as Maggie’s story shows. Moreover, with time, newcomers will become oldies too, rooted more deeply in-place by memories and a situated life-history. The “tension” expressed between the competing demands for change and continuity felt is therefore likely to persist. And so it should. It is in the discursive space *in-between* interpretive traditions where dialogue *both governs and* ensures movement. It is the space in-between where exchanges occur, boundaries blur, hybridisation and reversal happen, dichotomies dissolve, horizons are fused, and discordant voices can find a harmony.



IMAGE 10: FOOD ASSEMBLY WITH BOB’S “A TO Z OF THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN” DISPLAYED ON THE WALL

(Source: personal collection)

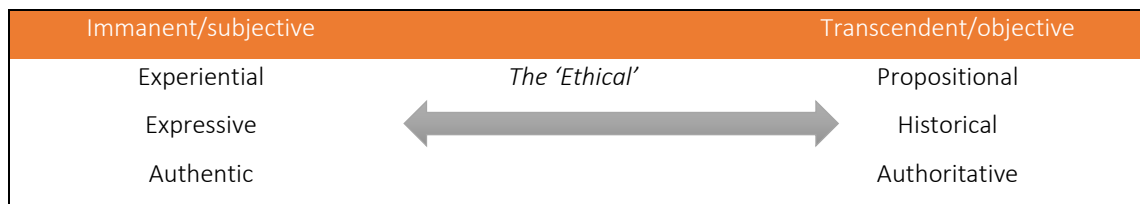


FIGURE 6: A SPECTRUM OF INTERPRETIVE TRADITIONS

(Source: author)

Following Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard, our varied forms of life supply the interpretative schemes that structure our understanding of the world and our place within it. A spectrum of belonging corresponds to the interpretive traditions of a discursive community. Heuristically, on Figure 6, we may locate the aesthetic-social discourse (expressing The Hub ‘brand’ of welcome and connectedness) within an expressive-experiential-authentic tradition. The religious discourse of a place of worship for those with “God in their lives”, on the other hand, sits closer to a propositional-historical-authored tradition. Borrowing from Derrida, John Caputo (1987) depicts the latter as ‘Rabbinic’ and the former as ‘Poetic’, correlative with Kierkegaard’s temporal model of (Gadamerian) recollection or (Derridean) repetition. Put differently, here lies the hermeneutic tension between continuity and change. Gadamer (1975) suggests however that different perspectives, or horizons of understanding, can be fused through dialogue or conversation. According to Merold Westphal (2009), this “always involves rising to a higher universality...the two worlds do not remain merely particular – alien, closed, eccentric to one another – but become part of a larger community within which differences are not abolished but mediated by conversation that effects understanding” (2009: 107). This does not mean that participants occupying different traditions will necessarily agree about the truth of the matter under discussion (e.g. what the place means). They may, however, understand the truth claims (what the place is about) inherent in each other’s discourse.

Mutual recognition and respect lead to mutual understanding. This requires a *productive*, creative interpretation that responds to the *reproductive* re-interpretation of inherited, story-formed meanings and vice versa. It neither grants authorial privilege to re-write the place, nor does it hold fast to a privileged interpretation “stuck” in the context of a previous readership. The conversation concerns our inherited possibilities,

a hermeneutic circle that is faithful to both the past and the present but oriented toward the future (Caputo 2007, 2018). Accepting Kate's invitation to "join-in" by participating in conversation, the different voices at St Peter's may find a "beautiful harmony". Dialogue inevitably results in story-telling since to share a sense of a place we have made our own also expresses *who we are*. These stories may be reproduced in numerous sharable forms as oral histories, personal testimonies, music, art and heritage displays. The representation of placeness is like a song we write *and* perform together.

Thus, it is the discursive space in-between, in a liminal and ambiguous zone of 'both/and', where hermeneutic movement occurs. It is also the "dialogic space" of place-making, where "many interpretations of place, actions, and fictions about the place-becoming" are explored (Schneekloth and Shibley 1995: 7). It is not a negotiated common ground where values or meanings necessarily converge. Rather, it is where otherness is acknowledged in the interplay of difference. It is in this 'ethical' middle ground that the 'volunteer' resides, where distinctions collapse in the space between oneself and another. Beginning with self/other, this intersubjective process hauls into a clearing a train of categories, classifications and conceptual distinctions: sacred/secular; presence/absence; belief/unbelief; religion/spirituality. Brought into the light of dialogic space, previously contested meanings may become hyphenated as mutual understandings of a singular place emerge: café-church or hub-church. Movement is produced in the midst of a creative tension, the harmonic of a string stretched taut between continuity and change. 'Being' in-place through discourse is the movement of becoming-together, of dwelling *and* journey, place *and* pathway.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Through the voices of different participants, this mini-ethnographic study points to a possible future for a multi-purposed church-building at the heart of rural village life. The concepts of place-meaning and place-identity have provided a lens to bring into sharper focus important themes of authenticity, alterity, continuity and change. In this case study we find participants in a postmodern, post-secular age situated in social space, engaged in conversations, sharing life-stories, discovering ways to belong. By sharing what a place means to 'me', we can each participate in a chorus of "*our place*". The challenge at St Peter's lies with the institutional Church as a choir-leader conducting different voices in the performance of belonging. Conceived abstractly as the predetermined outcome of a project, the concept of 'community' as a social identity is always imperilled by closure. That is, by drawing lines between 'us' (who are similar) and 'them' (who are different). Instead, a space of radical belonging, openness to the other, is a 'communion' that dissolves distinctions in an ongoing process of social discourse. In this discursive space "this is a church" is transformed into a question to which "it doesn't speak to me" is a legitimate reply. To which "where's Christ in this?" is answered with "God is in the welcome people receive". Where a squeezed and enclosed "holy space" is found to have opened-up for those who "connect with others and love them". But these are only opening exchanges. If a place speaks, we must expect multiple responses in an ongoing exchange. It entails a commitment to a bottom-up negotiation of what may or may not be deconstructed in the recreation of place in a space of mutual recognition. Its diverse participants do not re-write the place-story; they become instead co-authors of its next chapter. May the conversation continue.

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