

**Re-weaving threads of member identity
following a church merger**

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Abstract

A merger of churches has a large impact on the members and this research explores how member identity is impacted in the merging process. An explanatory metaphor – threads of member identity – was developed to explain how a merger challenges established attachments and to explore the process of re-weaving the threads. It is suggested that the six threads of identity that connect a member to the church are relational, locative, temporal, purposeful, procedural, and valuative.

The research question was considered through exploratory case studies in two merging churches, at different stages of merging. A semi-structured interview format was adopted as a means of data collection. Overall 31 members and leaders of the churches were interviewed, along with observation, participation and written material. The participants were asked about various aspects of their church involvement in the merging process and their understanding of identity.

The mergers were shown to disrupt member identity across the breadth of the six threads in affect, behaviour and cognition. The threads of member identity metaphor also provided an analytical tool for interpreting the identity work that was undertaken by church members in re-weaving their sense of belonging and identity into the merged churches.

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1 Introduction

This research considers how members of a church react when their church merges with another church. It brings together a variety of ideas to give an understanding to how the merging of churches influences church members' sense of identity with their original and merged church and uses the metaphor of threads of identity to give insight into both the content of member identity and the ways in which the merger process disrupts and challenges member identity.

1.1 The context of the study

Churches in New Zealand are dealing with issues arising from societal change, demographic pressures and economic hardship. Changing attitudes toward religious affiliation have resulted in a declining membership and a marginalisation of the church in New Zealand society. Statistics indicate clearly that fewer people attend church and those that do are older (Ward, 2006) although church membership has now become relatively stable at around ten percent of the population. While there are obvious exceptions, many churches are struggling with membership numbers, the funding of ministry, having people and money to undertake charitable tasks, and dealing with complex legal and compliance issues related to both practice and buildings. The voluntary sector must ensure that workers are not put at risk, and equally that the people that they minister to are kept safe. This also includes the need for earthquake strengthening of church buildings, which often have strong historic and emotional value, but are a seismic risk.

One option that many churches consider is the merging of two or more congregations into a larger, more economically viable, church unit. Such mergers can seldom be reversed and it is important for the health of the church that they are done properly, but personal experience and anecdotal evidence suggests that most mergers are less than successful at retaining the membership of the original congregations in the merged church. The reality is that a merger of churches provides a significant upheaval for members, eliciting anxieties and fears that are only partly tempered by the promise of what might come. Added to this is the fact that most members are over 50 – indeed, over 65 in several of the pre-merged churches of this study, and generally have long established patterns of relationship with the church which are disrupted by mergers.

Within church circles it is generally agreed that church mergers have often failed to increase membership and attendance. The Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand (PCANZ) has voiced its opposition to mergers (PCANZ, 2014), indicating that few succeed. They do, however,

acknowledge that two specific forms of merging (absorbing a small congregation into a larger one and re-starting a merged congregation within a new building and with new leadership) have shown some benefit.

This research explores the factors which make church members decide to stay or leave a church following a merger. It should be noted that this is generally not a question of a change in faith or belief, but a rejection of the institutional church. That is, people stop attending a church but do not necessarily lose their Christian conviction.

A common explanation for the failure of mergers is to identify some form of resistance to change within the members. There has been considerable exploration of resistance to change within the organisational psychology and management literatures with an emphasis on studies that promote ways of managing and diminishing resistance. Mainstream resistance to change models often categorise individuals as either advocates or adversaries of change, with advocates generally regarded more favourably than change resisters (Ybema, Thomas & Hardy, 2016). The generic concept of resistance to change has been challenged (Dent & Galloway Goldberg, 1999) but the question remains as to why some people either resist changes or find them difficult, and others adapt and adopt.

This research reframes resistance to (and adoption of) change as a response to challenges concerning member identity. Personal identity is a response to the question “who am I?” Organisational identity is a response to “who are we?” It is conceptualised that member identity exists between the two and is a response to the question “Who am I within this organisation?” It is therefore both personally and organisationally specific and contextually based. Changes for the person or organisation challenge the context of the member’s sense of belonging.

The challenge of identity demands that a person makes sense of who they are. Member identity work is a process of sense-making as the individual asks who they are in the organisation within a new context. Member identity work is an ongoing process in an everchanging environment, but it is more critical in the event of major change, such as a merger.

At the core of this research is a metaphoric image of member identity as a pattern woven with various threads. The use of a metaphoric image provides avenues for qualitative investigation that a more tightly structured theoretical model may limit. The use of metaphor draws on the reader’s experience and invites them into dialogue with the data.

The metaphor of threads and weaving suggests that the creation and re-creation of member identity is a cognitive process of making sense of challenges faced by being an individual within an

organisation – i.e. a member of that organisation. The fabric of identity is woven from key threads that bind an individual to the organisation. The metaphor provides a dynamic understanding of member identity as a concept shaped by context, timing and content (Seaman, Sharp & Coppens, 2017).

Six emergent threads of identity were identified through the research questions and the participant responses. These key themes are gathered into the metaphor of ‘threads of identity’ and suggest that identity is relational, locative, temporal, purposeful, procedural, and valuative. It is the analysis of these threads of identity, and the dynamic process of re-weaving them throughout the merger process, that is the basis of this research.

Member identity work is a weaving of threads into a common fabric of identity that expresses who a person is as a member of the church/organisation. A church merger poses a significant challenge to member identity and the member must re-weave their identity in the new church setting. This work sometimes becomes manifest as resistance to change, and at other times as adaptation to and acceptance of change. Successful members of the merged church are identified as those who have woven themselves a member identity using the threads of identity that are available within the new church environment.

1.2 My identity and this research

My own identity is forged in the fires of my life experience – and like my DNA that experience is made of common elements but gathered in a unique way. Much of my language and thinking is predicated by the theological journey I have been on. My work, as an ordained Presbyterian minister for over 30 years, has involved parish ministry, including several church mergers, and working in church administration at national and regional levels. I consider this research as an ecumenical expression – it brings together views from psychology, theology, management and my personal experience. It is not limited to one school of thought and seeks to develop a synthesis of divergent ideas.

Through reading, preliminary research and reflection, a synthesis of identity constructs began to be formulated that drew together a variety of ideas. The development of a weaving image provided a metaphoric basis on which to explore the research questions in a more ordered fashion. The “threads of member identity” metaphor allowed diversity in the nature of the threads, but also brought cohesion in their interweaving. It is suggested that individuals are bound to the church through key threads of identity that are re-woven in the event of a merger of churches, and also that

the church's identity is itself woven by the interaction of the individual members. The identification of six key threads, the impact of merging upon these threads, and the processes used to re-weave the threads are the framework of this research.

An individual has a unique identity that is grounded in their personality, culture and history, but which is also constantly being renegotiated through the interactions of daily living. In encounters with other people, an individual takes on a social identity that allows them to place themselves within their social context (or various contexts). More specifically, when an individual becomes part of an organisation they develop a member identity, which implies that member identity exists within the context of a collective identity. An organisation accumulates a collective identity from the interactions of those associated with it which is socially constructed by the individuals participating in the organisation.

Central to my research is the metaphor of weaving the threads of member identity, but equally the research is a weaving together of a variety of inter-related literatures from ecclesiology, psychology, sociology and management. Throughout the research process I have sought to weave the threads of my own experience with the narratives that have been shared to deepen an understanding of member identity and church mergers.

1.3 Metaphor

A key component of this research is the use of metaphor (threads of member identity) as an explanatory device that provides a structural and ontological orientation (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003) to the process of identification in a church merger. The use of a metaphor, although not common in psychological research, provides a conceptual framework for interpreting the complex psychological processes occurring during church mergers.

The use of metaphor also points to the epistemological basis of the research. In the church there are many people who believe that the bible contains all truth and it is the task of the church to proclaim the Word of God. This position can be compared to the positivist approach within psychology in that the object of study is considered to be distillable into a form of truth. A more liberal approach in the church is to consider that the bible contains the word of God and the voice is heard in dialogue rather than as a proclamation. This equates to a psychological approach of social constructivism, where the search for meaning is an ongoing journey. The use of an explanatory metaphor invites the reader to engage in dialogue about the topic of research.

Organisational studies have frequently used metaphor as a means of describing how organisations function and how they are perceived. The power of metaphor is found in its ability to build a cognitive connection between the known and the conceptual. An organisational metaphor, as developed and understood by one person, is grounded in the experience and context of the individual but it is also informed by the collective interpretation of the organisation shared by other members (Riad, 2011). As an example, the ‘church as family’ metaphor is grounded in a person’s experience of family, but it is also influenced by the stories others share of their families.

Academic interest in the use of metaphor in organisational research developed in the 1980’s from the works of Gareth Morgan (1980, 1986), and George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980/2003). Morgan’s approach came from a critical management background, while Lakoff and Johnson came from the fields of linguistics and cognitive psychology. While the use of metaphor in organisational and psychological research has not gained universal acceptance, it is increasingly accepted that it has legitimacy as a form of academic discourse (McCourt, 1997). Metaphor is understood to be at the edge of discovery, it is involved in the creation of new meaning (Soyland, 1994) by connecting concepts, ideas and emotions.

Cornelissen (2006) suggested that traditionally metaphors for organisations have used an objectivist understanding. The metaphor was assumed to be a comparative model that can be dissected and analysed in its various parts and maintain the comparison. The objectivist use of metaphor will often fall short of the mark by having its inadequacies highlighted, rather than the underlying theme promoted. The metaphor of a church as family, body, or choir (singing in various parts) can quickly be undermined by what that image fails to encapsulate or because of contextual associations. The family metaphor of a loving church, for instance, may be negated by the bad family experiences of some people.

An image-schematic use of metaphor suggests that “the metaphorical comparison of concepts triggers certain image-schemata (abstract imaginative structures)” (Cornelissen, 2006, 686). That is to say, the ongoing narrative about the metaphor enables new understanding and greater cohesion of thought, so the metaphor is not the end, but rather a lens which enables greater clarity. Metaphors are therefore part of our sense making processes – through them we develop a coherent structure to our experiences (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980/2003).

Cornelissen writes “metaphor is seen as a pervasive and cognitively fundamental way of structuring human understanding where meaning is created through the creative juxtaposition of concepts that are not normally interrelated” (Cornelissen, 2006, 687). Providing a metaphor gives a framework to thinking about a novel concept by linking it to an already familiar concept, i.e. ‘life is a journey’

invites a person to consider both their life and journeys they have taken. The link that develops between the concept and the metaphor is constructed through a cognitive process (Cornelissen, Kafouros & Lock, 2005) rather than being a truth to be discovered. This process is described as metaphorical mapping (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980/2003) which is shaped and constrained by our experiences.

Gareth Morgan's highly influential book 'Images of Organization' (Morgan, 2006) popularised some of the key metaphors used to describe organisations. Morgan gives a broad overview of the influence of metaphor in our understanding of organisational existence and shows how different metaphors emphasise different perspectives on organisations. Morgan's metaphors are of organisations as machines, as organisms, as brains, as cultures, as political systems, as psychic prisons, as flux and transformation, and as instruments of domination. As Morgan illustrates, the different metaphors create very different 'images of organization' for the reader.

The machine metaphor elicits an understanding of a rigidly structured organisation and echoes the beginnings of management theory in the work of Frederick Taylor. The organism metaphor develops a more flexible, living concept of an organisation, giving it an ability to adapt and grow. The brain metaphor highlights an organisational ability to process information and make decisions. The culture metaphor allows an understanding of aspects beyond the physical – ideology, values, norms and shared meaning. As a political system the metaphor captures the natural cooperation and competition that exists within an organisation. The final three metaphors are a little more obscure but convey fresh insights into the perception of an organisation. People may be trapped in their mental understanding of an organisation as in a psychic prison, they may be caught up in a struggle for power or they may be tossed about by the constant change they face.

Cornelissen, Kafournos & Lock (2005) undertook a study of metaphor in organisational literature and identified that a majority of metaphors used to describe organisations were classified as machine-like or animate being. They also considered a number of other themes, not as a conclusive list, but as an indication of what was being used. Using a personalised metaphor can enable human characteristics to be elicited from the organisation. These metaphors create a personification that allows participants and researchers to speak of their organisation as if it were an individual (Davies, Chun & da Silva, 2001). An example of the use of a family metaphor is found in a study of the intricate relationships within an organisation (Nicolson, 2012), with a psychoanalytic approach considering the internal dynamics.

When metaphors are used in organisational studies they tend to be reflections of the conceptualisation of organisational identity. The metaphors can be universal or particular (Jacobs,

Oliver & Heracleous, 2013). A universal metaphor is one that is well known and used in a variety of places – ‘we are the Body of Christ’ as a metaphor of the church is universal. A particular metaphor is developed from a local setting – ‘we are the heart of the City’ is more particular.

The threads of identity metaphor invites people to subjectively explore their own utilisation of real threads with the psychological impact of merging churches on a member’s sense of identity and belonging. It provides a cognitive map for understanding context and individual difference in member response to a church merger.

Several elements of the threads metaphor are worthwhile to make explicit at this point.

- Weaving is an ongoing activity – the cloth is never finished.
- There are a variety of threads – colour, size, shape and quantity.
- The weaving is a conscious choice, not a random knotting.
- Individuals help to weave an organisational identity and the organisation helps to weave individual identities.
- There are not six singular threads, but six types of threads.

1.4 Chapter Outline

Chapter 2 introduces research into churches as organisations. This provides a background for those less familiar with a church setting. The chapter considers some of the ways that churches have been analysed as organisations and reviews the limited research into church mergers. A third section considers aspects of identity in church studies and the chapter concludes with an overview of the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand – the denomination of the two case studies.

Chapter 3 considers the psychological literature relating to identity, mergers and resistance to change. The literature covers a broad diversity of studies from a number of fields and aims to synthesise disparate literatures concerning identity and organisational mergers into a coherent overview of the theoretical basis for this research.

Chapter 4 introduces the theoretical background to the six threads of identity. The conceptual basis for each thread is discussed and highlights that the metaphorical threads are created from a breadth of human experience.

Chapter 5 outlines the methodology of this research – exploring the iterative process that led to the development of the threads metaphor. It describes a preliminary study conducted at a church

conference and then considers how the levels of identity were explored. It then reflects on how the threads of identity were interpreted and how they were observed in the two church mergers. The chapter then shares the specific details of the two case studies of this research. It provides a description of Church Alpha and Church Beta, an overview of the participants in the study, and a consideration of the interview process. It then comments briefly on the observations and written material obtained in the research and how the data was analysed and written up. There is a final section that gives some background to the researcher.

Chapter 6 is the analysis of the first case study, Church Alpha. This chapter describes the merger between two previously separate churches at the early stages of coming together. It presents the findings for each metaphoric thread and addresses how the threads were challenged by the merger, the impact of that challenge on the members, how identity work was begun and the ways in which the leadership sought to address the change.

Chapter 7 is the analysis of the second case study, Church Beta. This church was created through the merger of four separate churches that had formally combined four years before the research took place, but church members saw the merger as an ongoing process. This chapter also presents the findings for each thread and addresses the identity work that was still being undertaken, and the leadership focus. It highlights the differences in identity work that occur between the early and later stages of the merger process.

Chapter 8 explores the implications of the research in terms of church mergers, church life in general and discusses how the metaphor might be used in other organisations as a means of working through organisational mergers.

2 Churches

Churches are organisations, but they stand in contrast to many other organisations due to their faith component and voluntary membership. This chapter explores some of the unique attributes of churches and describes how they have been analysed in the past. It is noted that questions of faith or belief have not been addressed by the research.

2.1 The church as an organisation

Church (with a capital) is a universal term, church (lower case) or congregation is a more specific term used to describe the people who gather to worship in a specific locale. In much of the literature (and in conversation) church and congregation are used interchangeably at the local level. Minister, priest or clergy are also terms that are interchangeable, indicating people who have been ordained (set aside) for specific spiritual and organisational functions. In the Presbyterian Church ministers are appointed by a regional court (the Presbytery), but their stipend is paid by the local church/parish. The local church is led by both the minister and lay leaders (elders) elected by the church members.

First and foremost, churches are seen by the Church as faith communities – people who are gathered together with a shared belief in God. Their *raison d'être* is to be followers of Christ who proclaim the gospel to the world. Churches have two key aspects of their congregational life, identity and persuasion (Baab, 2007). Identity addresses the question of who they are, while persuasion reflects the mandate to “preach the gospel.” For a church the latter differs from a business, for which the persuasion is often centred on profit and growth.

Churches are voluntary, not-for-profit, organisations. The voluntary nature of church is such that there is no legal obligation for continued membership – although there is often a strong social or familial expectation. The measurement of success in a church is generally a balance between quantitative and qualitative assessment. The former counts the number of attendees, members or financial performance, while the latter evaluates the depth of spirituality, commitment of members or strength of community cohesion. Church hierarchies tip the balance toward a more quantitative assessment¹ while church members are often more qualitative.

¹ The Presbyterian Church has a set of criteria that define a healthy congregation, including numerical growth.

Financial streams within the church are from donations, investments and “trading” (often in the form of property rental, but also catering, child activities, or services). The donations are given as an “offering” which is specifically given to the work of the church, generally without any conditions. Most church buildings are inherited from preceding congregations, especially in the more established denominations.

It can also be noted that the autocratic, hierarchical nature of the church is waning. The image from the 1960’s of clergy domination of the churches through their control of sacramental and bureaucratic systems is no longer valid. There is still a strong influence of clergy – but this is more attributable to their full-time employment (availability) and training, rather than to an inherent authority.

Perhaps one of the simplest categorisations of churches is undertaken by numeric analysis. A number of church studies identify size as a significant contributor to the identity of a congregation. A general pattern has been described by Oswald (1991) who suggests four categories based on size: Family, Pastoral, Program and Corporate.

The Family Church has under 50 active members, is dominated by a patriarch/matriarch, are strong advocates for tradition and independent in thought and action. Ministries are often shorter in duration and change is harder to accomplish.

The Pastoral Church has 50-150 active members, is clergy-centric, treasures familiarity and is often limited by the ability of the minister to maintain contacts within the local church.

The Program Church (others may use Community Church) has 150-350 active members, has a minister who acts as an executive officer over a paid/volunteer leadership team, has a division of tasks, and awareness that not everyone will know each other.

The Corporate Church has an active membership over 250 and is generally run by a minister who is the CEO and focussed on building the church as a business and in numbers.

Such categories are clearly heuristics for broad analysis, but they do provide interesting insight into church development and mergers. The transition from one category to another is considered the most difficult aspect of church life (Oswald, 1991) and when a merger fails to account for the different sized congregations they are often heading for strife. This includes the situation where two family sized churches come together to form a larger community church – which provides challenges for all member to adapt to.

There have been other attempts at providing an analysis of congregations and a summary of four is given in Figure 1 below. It is important to note that all four include forms of clear objectives, good structures, strong leadership and inspiring worship. At the heart of all the models is an understanding that the triple purpose of a church is, in God's name, to undertake worship, pastoral care and evangelism.

Kennon Callahan's twelve characteristics (Callahan, 1983) have been used in the church for thirty years and have provided an effective tool for planning in many congregations. The division between relational characteristics (the first 6 listed above) and functional characteristics is important, with the former seen as offering positive input to a church where the latter, when lacking, are a negative factor². At the heart of Callahan's strategy is that churches identify strengths from the twelve characteristics and build on them rather than dwelling on areas of struggle.

Christian Schwarz's understanding of Natural Church Development (NCD) is built on a model of empirical research, natural observation and the study of Scripture (Schwarz, 1996). Schwarz gives the image of a barrel to illustrate that "the shortest stave determines the amount of water a barrel can hold" (Schwarz, 1996:53) which points to building factors up to a minimum requirement for growth – what could be described as strengthening areas of weakness within the church.

Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce have based their approach on data gathered from a wide variety of churches (Woolever & Bruce, 2004) using their psychology background and a comprehensive church survey. In contrast to Schwartz, their approach is declared as building on strengths and they affirm that churches are both universal and local, with the latter implying an element of uniqueness. At the heart of this approach is an understanding that church identity is developed through a wide number of factors and through difficult conversations. They see the ten factors as all being essential to the development of a church, but three, participating in the congregation, welcoming new people, and caring for children and youth are essential for significant church growth (Woolever & Bruce, 2004).

Dan Dick's work comes from a Methodist tradition and is more focussed on community impact than spiritual growth (Dick, 2007). Dick sees a strong sense of identity as the most important factor in developing a church and explains that understanding against four categories of congregations – vital, dystrophic, retrogressive and decaying.³

² From personal notes taken at a Callahan seminar in 1987.

³ vital = stable and growing, dystrophic = unstable and growing, retrogressive = stable but declining, decaying = unstable and declining.

Callahan (1983)	Schwarz (1996)	Woolever & Bruce (2004)	Dick (2007)
Specific, concrete missional objectives	Empowering leadership	Growing spirituality	Clarity of identity
Pastoral and lay visitation	Gift-oriented ministry	Meaningful worship	Vision saturation
Corporate, dynamic worship	Passionate spirituality	Participating in the congregation	Impact awareness
Significant relational groups	Functional structures	Having a sense of belonging	Shared Leadership
Strong leadership resources	Inspiring worship	Caring for children and youth	Dependency variables
Streamlined structure	Holistic small groups	Focusing on the community	Balanced focus (congregation/world)
Several competent programmes	Need-oriented evangelism	Sharing faith	
Open accessibility	Loving relationships	Welcoming new people	
High visibility		Empowering leadership	
Adequate parking		Looking to the future	
Space and facilities			
Solid finances			

Figure 1. Comparison of Church Analyses

While the four approaches discussed above are derived from different academic traditions (from theology to psychology) and develop quite different models there are some consistencies. All stress the importance of leadership, the value of worship and the need for a clear mission vision.

2.2 Mergers in church literature

Apart from a few papers by A.W. Wicker in the 1970's there are few academic studies into the processes of church mergers. Wicker provides a quantitative viewpoint of church mergers and assumes that they are legitimate objects of study. His approach is typified by a study of a merger of churches of differing sizes which concluded that attendance, participation and commitment varied according to the size of the original church (Wicker and Kauma, 1974) but had little exploration of why this was happening.

A metaphor of marriage was utilised by A.W. Black (1988) in addressing issues arising from the church union movement.⁴ In advocating the marriage metaphor Black identified that there was no single-factorial explanation for success or failure, that context of time and place has an influence, that some similarities need to be existent, that a period of engagement is important and that a willingness to work together demands compromise. Black suggests that using the marriage model would assist in giving insights into the ecumenical merger of churches.

Within the church there has often been an understanding that the merger of two struggling churches creates one struggling church (see Bandy, 2007; Walker, 2011). Many churches are facing demographic, social and financial pressures and one way of continuing existence is to merge with another church. For many this is a point of last resort (Brenner, 2008) and is a sign that things are not going well (Laribee, 1998) so there are lower expectations for the future. But there is a danger of attributing success or failure to a merger without considering the impact of changes in ministry, buildings or social context. Laribee (1998) also points out that the perceived failure of a merger might not simply suggest that the two churches should not have merged, but rather it may indicate that the process of merging was badly enacted.

Tom Bandy has given ten keys to success and ten pitfalls to avoid in promoting church mergers (Bandy, 2007). Central to his list is the concept of a merger fulfilling a mission agenda and building on that foundation. He does not attempt to develop a psychological approach to the merging process, but the language of mission in the church is similar to that of purpose in management and to motivation in psychology.

In all of the church literature on merging one vital element is how success is measured. There is a commonly held view that mergers are successful when numbers are increasing (Bandy, 2007), other views are that lack of conflict (Laribee, 1998) or increased commitment (Wicker and Kauma, 1974) are indicators. One uniting factor of the studies into church mergers has been the influence of a positivist approach that objectifies the church as an entity to be manipulated for success. Such studies seek to answer the question of how to successfully merge a church.

⁴ The Church Union movement was a strong ecumenical drive in the 20th Century that sought to unite the various denominations of the protestant church. In New Zealand the failed Church Union votes of the 1970's involved Anglican, Presbyterian, Methodist, Congregational and Churches of Christ participation.

2.3 Church Identity

A recent publication of the World Council of Churches notes

“Although the New Testament provides no systematic ecclesiology ... (it offers)... images and metaphors used to express the identity of the church.”⁵

It is hoped that there is no need to justify the assertion that a church is a specific type of organisation and that church identity is a specific form of organisational identity. In that regard, it can be suggested that the organisational identity of a discrete church is enduring, distinctive, central and coherent (Gioia, Schultz and Corley, 2002). A church will often meet weekly for worship and develops governance processes that give it an enduring presence in their community. Most local churches can highlight attributes of their fellowship which differentiate them from other churches in the community (for example, Protestant, traditional, Pentecostal or informal). Members are also likely to be able to define elements of their local church that are central to their understanding of who they are. In a Presbyterian church, for example, the rule of elders would be a central element of identity. They would also find a coherence in their working together, a view that it makes sense to be the church that they are.

Studies on identity in church literature suggest that various themes related to identity could be considered. Aspects of social or cultural identity relate to an understanding of who people think they are and there are matters raised about history and process. This research suggests that member identity is a weaving of these various themes into a fabric that makes sense of their belonging to the church.

Many people would see their church's identity as intimately linked to their individual identity as a Christian. But a variety of research over the years has shown that church identity is as contextual as any other form of social or organisational identity. A church analyst, Donald McGavran, stated that “people like to become Christian without crossing racial/linguistic/class/cultural barriers. In other words they prefer to remain who they are culturally while changing to become Christian. Culturally they remain the same and tend to gather with others from the same culture who share their faith” (McGavran, 1970, 198).

McGavran's assertion is contradicted by research in the United Kingdom that churches with an ethnic mix were more likely to grow than those of one ethnicity, and that the richer the ethnic mix the more likely they are to grow (Jackson, 2002). Horrell (2012) writes that in the Epistles of the

⁵ From - The Church: Towards a Common Vision, World Council of Churches, Geneva, 2013, p9.

New Testament there is a sense in which Christian becomes the overarching identity that subsumes or supercedes race, nation and people⁶. This may be interpreted as showing that the cultural identities are less important when there is greater diversity – in psychological terms, there are too many categories of cultural identity to make any one dominant and a higher identity is adopted. More recently Jason Goroncy has noted that “ethnic identities are never static realities but are always negotiated and renegotiated phenomena” (Goroncy, 2013, 8). Cultural and religious identity are regarded as constructed ideas and reflect varying contexts, history and people. It could be suggested that cultural identity also has a variety of threads and in a church these threads are interwoven with other aspects of identity. Studies of the early Christian church show that the church has constantly grappled with disparate ethnic and cultural groups and how they might merge them into a cohesive church body.

In a study of the early church, Gentiles and Jewish converts were identified as subgroups of the superordinate group of the Jesus movement. The latter became an out-group of the Jews. Along the lines of Social Identity Theory there were conflicts between the early converts to Christianity from Jewish and Gentile backgrounds. The process of re-categorisation – taking “us” and “them” and making an inclusive “we”- was an essential task of the early church. Baptism in Christ became an initiation into the superordinate group but this challenged the Jewish identity of those early converts.

Another early church study considered the formation of identity through the passages of Q.⁷ Q takes a “Galilean perspective that takes a distant stance toward Jerusalem and a positive one towards the Gentiles” (Guijarro, 2007, 95). There is a sense of a memory communion – disciples gathering to share their stories, but only those that suit their perspective. History is commonly said to be written by the winners and that story reflects their journey to the top, often without reference to past differences.

2.4 The Presbyterian Church

The two merged churches studied in this research came from two (previously 6) Presbyterian churches and so this section gives a basic description of the Presbyterian Church.

⁶ Being Christian (Χριστιανός, Christianos) subsumes or supercedes race (γένος, genos), nation (ἔθνος, ethnos) and people (λαός, laos).

⁷ Q is the annotation given to the supposed document that both Matthew and Luke shared in writing their Gospels – material which was not contained in Mark.

The Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand (PCANZ) was founded in 1842 by settlers from the Church of Scotland and the Free Church of Scotland. The northern and southern⁸ Presbyterian churches united in New Zealand in 1901. Central to Presbyterian ecclesiology is the preaching of the Word, educated ministers and equal governance by elders and ministers. Elders are members of the local church who have been elected to positions of leadership in the spiritual oversight of the church.

The ecumenical movement of the mid-20th Century broke down many of the denominational barriers that had previously existed and in the early 21st Century there are some greater divides within a denomination than between them. For example, a liberal Presbyterian and liberal Methodist often have more in common than do a liberal Presbyterian and a conservative Presbyterian. The terms “liberal” and “conservative” are used with caution here – they are limited in describing the complexity of theopraxis⁹ that people use. Many people will claim to follow the Way of Christ but there is no definition of only one way.

Presbyterian churches are more congregational (locally independent) than some other denominations, although the regional Presbytery is the primary body to whom they are responsible. Presbyterian ministers are appointed by the Presbytery and cannot be “fired” by the congregation. The General Assembly is the national body and provides governance for matters of national importance. Assembly, Presbytery and the local church are all led by a moderator, who has a role of facilitating discussion rather than providing dominating leadership. A moderator does not move, second or vote on formal motions.

A local Presbyterian congregation is not like a franchise or branch of the national church – it is perhaps best likened to a school where the Board and Principal have much freedom, the curriculum is an interpretable document, and a local identity can develop. In a church most decisions are made at the local congregational level, doctrine is seldom challenged, and local expressions of church are predominant.

A comparison of the statistics for 2005 and 2015 (figure 2) are indicative of the challenges for the PCANZ. There are significant changes across the church’s demographics that demonstrate why there are an increasing number of church mergers and closures.

⁸ The southern church was based on the Otago settlement and covered all areas south of the Waitaki River.

⁹ Theopraxis is the way or practice of people in expressing their faith in God.

	2005	2015	Notes
Census	400,000	330,500	<i>2006 and 2013</i>
Members	29,000	23,000	<i>confirmed members</i>
Adherents	13,000	10,000	<i>associates but not full members</i>
CV/Union	12,000	7,600	<i>ecumenical shared churches</i>
Worship	29,000	22,000	<i>average June attendance</i>
Presbyteries	23	7	<i>regional courts</i>
Parishes	428	370	<i>locally governed church groups</i>

Figure 2 : PCANZ Statistics, 2005 and 2015

A statistical survey of PCANZ in 2013 illustrated that the average parish had 83 people at worship – but averages are not an effective illustration of reality. A pie graph (figure 3) shows the size of parishes (PCANZ, 2013)

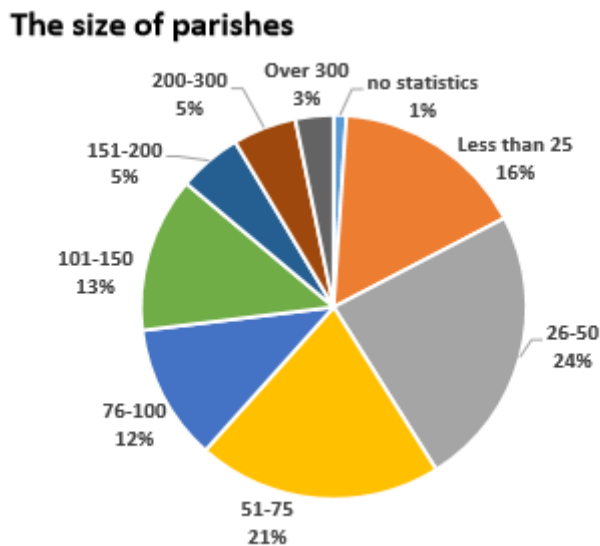


Figure 3 : pie graph of parish size

With the decline in membership of PCANZ there has also been a decline in the number of ministers and ministry positions. The average age of active ministers has also increased, although there have been a few younger people willing to train for a career in ministry. Presbyterian ministers are not forced to move and cannot be fired by their local church – although their sense of call may be challenged by the regional courts of the church.

It could also be said (as a member) that PCANZ has, in recent years, struggled to define its' own organisational identity. Four themes from recent General Assemblies reflect the diversity of the church; Christ-centred, Community-facing (2006), Reformed and Reforming (2008), Making disciple-making disciples (2010), and Reviving the Flame (2012).

Within the context of the Presbyterian Church and New Zealand society this research of two church mergers was undertaken. While some may suggest that the church is facing a crisis of faith, it is also clear that there are organisational phenomena to consider. Church members, like members of other organisations, have their sense of belonging disrupted by change and seek ways to make sense of the change and re-weave their member identity.

3 Identity, Mergers and Resistance to Change

This chapter gives an overview of the literature that has informed this research. The information comes from the fields of psychology, management and sociology, and reflects the cross disciplinary basis in understanding organisations and identity. The reading reflects an iterative approach to this study – with an interaction between the ongoing interviews and analysis, and deepening article research as various threads began to emerge in the analysis.

The first section of this chapter considers some of the background studies to the concepts within the various fields that consider identity. Identity is a broad area of research and the summary here reflects the literature that relates to this particular study.

The second section of this chapter outlines some of the literature into mergers that is relevant to this study.

The third section reviews the literature on change management, including material related to resistance to change.

3.1 Identity

The number of studies and articles looking into aspects of identity has steadily increased over the last 50 years (Côté, 2006; Kavanagh & Ashkanasy, 2006). The production of so many words and hours of research has not, however, provided a consensus of what identity really is nor how it should be studied. A few papers in recent years have lamented the confused state of identity research (Côté, 2006; Brubaker & Cooper, 2000; Abdelal, *et al*, 2006) and the lack of clear definition. It is important, therefore, to give an understanding of what is meant by identity in the context of this research.

Identity is a person's understanding and working out of their individuality (individual identity), their social affiliations (social identity) and their sense of a collective self (organisational identity). It has been suggested that we can understand identity as 'a way of being-in-relation-to-others' (Cunliffe 2001: 361). Identity is both relational and contextual – it exists within the social networks of human relationships and within specific locations. When the concept of identity is decontextualised (Wetherell & Mohanty, 2013) the conversation treats it as an object rather than as a subjective reality. This affirms the need for context to be considered when talking about identity – being aware that the context is both physical and relational.

Questions are also asked about whether identity is derived from the need for similarity or distinctiveness (Vignoles, Chrysochoou & Breakwell, 2000). Others address the issue of identity in terms of fit, whether the individual can find a comparative fit or normative fit with others (Brickson, 2013).

The field of organisational identity research is diverse and there are no predominant models to accurately portray exactly what 'organisational identity' entails. It is a psychological concept that affirms an individual's cognitive, emotional and practical relationship with a collective – but how can it be observed? A number of studies, from a wide range of epistemological backgrounds, have suggested that organisational identity has a variety of elements within it.

In an early study in this field, Michael Brown suggested that identification involved an attraction to the organisation, a shared goal, loyalty and a sense of membership (Brown, 1969). Identification was considered as individuals' understanding of the relationship between themselves and the organisation (social object). The model was based on the idea that satisfaction in the process of self defining is the psychological motivator of identity.

Rooney, Paulsen, Callan, Brabant, Gallois and Jones (2010) identified five semantic clusters in their research into change¹⁰ at a hospital; care, place, temporality, role/function and the change process. Their practical explanation of these clusters was;

“*Care* includes related constructions of mental health, community, and money. *Place* includes discussion of hospital, wards, patients, areas, and work. *Temporality* was concerned with the past (years, back, and long), retrospection (thought), and what is and has been done (work and worked). *Role/function* included work roles (role, nursing, level, position), while *change* included models, groups, process, service, information, and management (Rooney, *et al*, 2010, p 13).”

One of the compelling insights that arose from this hospital study was that place identity is a component of social identity – that the places in which people live and relate has an influence on their sense of self-esteem and belonging. Such an understanding seemed important in exploring relationships within historic church settings.

Abdelal, Herrera, Johnston, Martin and McDermott (Abdelal, *et al*, 2006; Abdelal, *et al*, 2009) have produced articles and a book dealing with concepts of organisational identity seeking to be interdisciplinary in its approach. Identity is treated as a variable and it is clearly understood to be

¹⁰ It is noted that organisational change is different to mergers, but of interest here are the semantic clusters of identity talk.

both relational and situational. They suggest that the content of organisational identity includes: constitutive norms, social purposes, relational comparisons, and cognitive models.

Constitutive norms refer to the formal and informal rules that govern the relationships within the group. Churches certainly have a formal understanding of what it is to be a denomination, a local church, or even a choir member. There are also a variety of social expectations that guide behaviour, like being silent at times in church, dressing appropriately, and caring for one another.

Social purposes refer to the shared goals of members. At a higher level it is obvious that a church has a clear purpose:

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19).

But it is also clear that churches share a variety of purposes – indeed, that is one causal factor of the variety of denominations in the Church.

Relational comparisons refer more closely to Social Identity Theory and the place of categorisation as people define themselves by who they are and who they are not. Much of what is understood as being Presbyterian has, over 400 years of history, largely been defined by not being Roman Catholic. For instance, sitting in the pews for communion, not having incense, avoiding icons, and not having bishops.

Cognitive models refer to the worldviews of members and to the political and social interests they share. This affirms that all aspects of identity are directly related to the cognition of the individual, and that people enter membership with different worldviews (and theologies).

From an entirely different perspective, in a commentary on a biblical text, David Horrell has suggested that ethnic identity is aligned with a common name, a myth of ancestry, shared history, common elements of culture, a homeland link, and a sense of solidarity (Horrell, 2012). This is based on a New Testament reading¹¹ and the connections made with identity research in a variety of fields. Horrell provides a view of identity and ethnicity that seems relevant to more than scholars of the New Testament.

Searching for a name in a merger of churches is an important activity, often requiring strategic negotiations. The myth of ancestry referred to all Hebrews being descendants of Abraham – in line with the church affirming a common family of God. The shared history and elements of culture are elements that arise in the church narratives, along with a link to the physical church.

¹¹ 1 Peter 2:9: But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

The metaphorical threads of church identity proposed in this research bring together some elements of each of the studies above to help interpret the psychology of church mergers. In this framework it is assumed that church identity is relational, purposeful, procedural, temporal, locative and evaluative.

3.2 Mergers

The merging of organisations has been studied in a variety of fields including management, sociology, political science and psychology. The largest portion of the literature is in business studies (Cartwright & Schoenberg, 2006) emanating from the United States and the United Kingdom. With some exceptions, the use of the terms merger, acquisition or takeover is interchangeable and describes the coming together of two or more identifiably independent organisations or groups.

In a recent overview of research in the field of mergers and acquisitions it was noted that around 81% of studies were of a quantitative design and 16% a qualitative design (the remainder were mixed) (Cartwright, Teerikangas, Rouzies & Wilson-Evered, 2012). In the overview three thematic areas of research into mergers and acquisitions had been identified; being strategic, managerial and financial. Strategic studies were the major theme (61%) and included research on performance, strategic decisions and dynamics. The financial theme was considered under-represented¹² at below 5%. The third theme was management focused, at 34%, and included studies related to dealing with people. Within the managerial aspect lies research about identity and culture which represented 5.5% of the studies evaluated (Cartwright, *et al*, 2012).

The diversity of epistemologies, ontological frameworks and methodologies in the research into mergers means that choices of approach should be carefully made. Some of the topics of research into mergers that have caught my attention are briefly touched upon in this chapter. I feel it is important to acknowledge some of this work, but not to allow it to dominate the main theme of identity.

Studies have focussed on organisational leadership (Ferris, Jayaraman & Sabherwal, 2013; Tikhomirov & Spangler, 2010; and Gill, 2012) and managerial leadership (Kavanagh & Ashkanasy, 2006). Within the churches of this study it was clear that the ministers have played a significant role in the change processes, but it can also be noted that the form of leadership is significantly different to what might be found in a corporate environment. While the ministers clearly influence what

¹² The studies were from management journals, not financial journals.

happens within their churches and influence the church's identity, the individual member's identity work is the object of my research.

An aspect of mergers that was not followed up on in this research was the status or equality of the partners (Zaheer, Schomaker & Genc, 2003; Geissner, Ullrich & van Dick, 2011, Jetten, Duck, Terry & O'Brien, 2002; Amiot, Terry & Callan, 2007; and Fischer, Greitemeyer, Omay, & Frey, 2007). In both case studies of this research there were elements of inequality between the merging churches, including aspects of age, finances and numbers. However, while the status of the churches will influence church identity, the necessity of identity work for all members is present.

Identity, culture and image are three vital aspects of an organisation (Hatch & Shultz, 1997). The exploration of organisational culture has provided insight into elements of success and failure in mergers (Cartwright & Cooper, 1993; Giffords & Dina, 2003; Drori, Wrzesniewski & Ellis, 2011). Culture is interpreted as an expression of how people understand an organisation will act and is extrinsic to the individual, while identity relates to how people think about the organisation and is intrinsic (Grimson, 2010). Allied to culture and identity is the idea of organisation image – related to how people think others see their organisation. In a merger the organisational images must gain clarity just as the organisational culture and identity must develop.

Another area of merger research has centred on the necessity of a merger and the negativity that arises when people sense that there is no need to merge (Geissner, 2011). While there were several people in this research who considered the mergers to be forced upon them (for a variety of reasons) they were continuing to do identity work. Those who left the church, however, have not had their reasons for leaving clarified (by the church or by this research). It has been suggested that employees in a merger take on the norms, values and goals of the merged organisation (Geissner, Horton & Humborstad, 2016), but this fails to account for those who ceased to be employees – and in this research it is those who left the church because they could not take on the norms, values and goals of the merged church.

A number of merger studies have also considered aspects of identity within their research, often associated with Social Identity Theories. A merger obviously brings together two organisational identities and there is a need to re-formulate an in-group. One study, based on a New Zealand bank experience, indicated that using a tangible symbol of the new identity (in the form of stationery and colour) was helpful in creating a combined identity (Joseph, 2014).

3.3 Managing Change

Change management studies have continued to consider how organisations might be managed through the changes they undergo to be more effective. Two aspects of change management have come into focus within this research – resistance to change and the role of change manager.

Alvin Zander (in Dent & Goldberg, 1999) defined resistance to change as any behaviour that an individual took to protect themselves from the real or imagined effects of organisational change. Research into resistance to change, and the practical implications of the research, focussed on how to bring people around to the proposed changes in the form of adaptation (van den Heuvel, Demerouti & Bakker, 2014). At the turn of the century attention was given to the concept of positive resistance (de Jager, 2001) and the value of a questioning attitude. More recently the challenge against the agent-centric view of management (Ford, et al, 2008), which assumes that the decision to change is the right choice, asks if the negativity of resistance is developed by the change managers (Vos & Rupert, 2017).

Underlying the conventional view of resistance to change is that the change is the right thing to do and that resistance is incorrect. Many change management strategies have, unfortunately, focussed on how to defeat any resistance rather than consider the nature of the change. Critics of conventional views of resistance to change have argued that the objection to an organisational change may, in fact, be a legitimate concern. There is also the consideration that resistance to change may derive from a person's uncertainty concerning their new organisational identity and membership (Wagoner, Belvadi & Jung, 2017).

Reframing 'resistance to change' as a more neutrally understood 'response to change' removes the barriers between agents and change managers and invites a consideration of the impact of the change upon people's sense of membership and identity within the organisation.

Within the church the primary (but not exclusive) change agents are the ministers. The change agents are identified as the people who control the processes of organisational change and devise the strategies to implement it. There is, of course, a significant difference between the work of managers in a factory implementing a production line change and effecting change in a voluntary organisation such as a church. The one consistency is that there needs to be leadership in some form to enable any change to happen.

Consideration of the work of the change agents is not an evaluation of their success or failure, but a reflection of the strategies they adopt and the response of organisational members. Ministers are seldom trained in change management, but generally have inherent skills in managing people.

This research explores how member identity in a church is affected by a merger of churches and how perceived resistance to the merger might be explained in terms of an effort of people to make sense of their relationship to the new church by re-weaving threads of identity.

4. Spinning the Threads

At the risk of stretching the metaphor too far - before threads are woven there is a need to spin strands of material into the threads that will weave together. This chapter highlights some of the academic precursors to the six threads of identity proposed in this study.

4.1 Relational Threads

The primary area of identity research has been in understanding the relationship of the individual to the group. A theoretical foundation is found in the social identity approach, including Social Identity Theory and Self Categorisation Theory, based on the work of Henri Tajfel and John Turner. In simple terms, a social identity approach is an understanding that we grow our social identity through the comparison of in-groups and out-groups, and seek to categorise people.

Tajfel defines social identity as “that part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” (Tajfel, 1981: 255). Social Identity Theory is framed around an individual’s perception of their social status in relation to groups or organisations. Self-Categorisation Theory is a wider development in the social identity approach that addresses issues surrounding the cognitive development of social categories (Hogg & Terry, 2000). It suggests that some of who we are is derived from the categories of groups we think that we belong to.

Both Social Identity Theory and Self Categorisation Theory focus on the individual as a member of a group or organisation. Together they affirm that the development of identity is a reflexive process (Stets & Burke, 2000) that defines both a person’s distinctiveness and similarity to other people. It is a socio-cognitive process whereby a person builds up a repertoire of discrete category memberships (Hogg & Terry, 2001). This is valid when such reflections are either on a given category (such as ethnicity, gender or age) or on a voluntary category (such as church membership or political affiliation).

Tajfel suggests that a person will remain or join a group if the group makes a positive impact for their social identity and will leave, where possible, if they are not satisfied (Tajfel, 1981). He also points out that those staying will either change their interpretation of the group or change the group to gain satisfaction. This has been identified as either social creativity or social competition (Haslam, 2001).

An element of Social Identity is a person's sense of fit with the social group. Fit refers to the degree to which a particular self-categorization matches subjectively relevant features of reality – so that the categorization in question appears to be a sensible way of organizing and making sense of the world (i.e., oneself and other people) (Millward and Haslam, 2013). The cognitive process of deciding if a person fits an organisation is seen as either comparative or normative. Comparative fit, for example, occurs when people in the choir feel that they are somewhat unique in the life of the church. Normative fit occurs when the patterns followed are within an acceptable parameter, and the choir functions in a perceived normality.

The sense of fit is not only relevant for the relational threads of identity but is equally important for the other threads. All threads are woven within a cognitive process of sense-making (identity work) that allows the member to fit into the church.

Another aspect of Social Identity is that two conditions are needed for self-categorisation to develop, identification and category salience. Identification being understood as requiring a person to be able to categorise themselves as part of a group/organisation, and category salience relates to the context and sensibility of identifying (Van Dick, Ullrich & Tissington, 2005).

A variety of experimental studies have been carried out to investigate aspects of social identity in merger situations. These have largely been de-contextualised to provide experimental conditions, losing some sense of the complexity of identity, and have focussed on constructed groups. Group studies have focussed on areas such as in-group bias (van Leuwen, van Knippenburg and Ellemers, 2003), dominant and non-dominant groups (van Knippenburg and van Leuwen, 2001), and group status (Amiot, Terry and McKimmie, 2012).

One criticism of social identity theory is that it has treated history like a 'black box' (Liu, Wilson, McLure, Higgins, 1999) and neglected to contextualise the information gained. It is easy to suggest that religious identity is defined by scriptural text and that it is invariant over time and place. "Yet sociological and anthropological work shows the meanings of such texts are not given but contingent upon the political, social and economic context of those reading them" (Hopkins, 2011:531). Being Presbyterian today is different to being Presbyterian 20 years ago, and it is likely that people understand that change has happened (or has to happen).

A challenging aspect of Social Identity Theory is that it is based on self-enhancement and this precludes a significant aspect of church life – altruism. Hogg and Terry note that "it is assumed that people have a very basic need to see themselves in a positive light in relation to relevant others" (Hogg and Terry, 2001, 4), but the nature of Christian faith sometimes challenges this where

concepts such as “the first shall be last,” or “the meek will inherit the earth” are part of the cognitive or theological framework.

Relational threads are conceived as being woven in accordance with elements of social identity theory. They are woven between the individual and various groups within the organisation in the context of ongoing struggle and contestation (Hopkins, 2011). For instance, a person may be not only a member of the church but also of the choir, women’s group or flower roster. Any or all of these categories of belonging provide the material for weaving member identity. There is a cognitive process of evaluating whether that person fits the group of people they associate with and the reasonableness of their membership.

4.2 Locative Threads

A specific area of identity research is in the field of place identity or place attachment. There is an understanding that a person’s personal identity is built in relation to their physical environment (Marcouyeux & Fleury-Bahi, 2011). Place and identity can be considered co-constitutive (Wyse, et al, 2012) because one cannot exist without the other. Place identity arises from the socialisation of the self in a physical environment (Proshansky, Fabian, & Kaminoff, 1983). It could be said that in research literature place attachment is often understood as an emotional connection, while place identity is considered as more cognitively founded (Devine-Wright, 2009) – this reflects a confounding of definitions and here I will use only place identity.

Place identity is considered to arise from the physical and historical connections to a place which holds a relational connection to an individual (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013). Such a definition suggests that place identity is a dynamic process rather than a static object. A church, for instance, is constantly changing – even if only deteriorating through lack of maintenance – and this has an impact on place identity. It is also noted that each individual has a different history in connection with a place, and therefore a variant understanding of identity.

There is an important distinction to be made between externalised place identity that objectifies a physical presence, and an internalised ownership of place that carries with it significance for the individual. This could be described as the difference between a house (objective) and a home (subjective).

Locative threads are woven by a church member within the physical presence of the church congregation. This may be as broad as the town or as narrow as a pew, but they are woven in the context of a location where the membership is developed.

4.3 Temporal Threads

Issues about history, continuity and change, and connectivity are found in the literature about mergers. Clark and Rowlinson (2004) challenged the social sciences to have a greater sense of history in their understanding of social processes. There is a need to acknowledge that the past is not an abstract concept but an active agent in the present.

A merger is a significant historic event for any organisation and necessitates a great deal of change, but this happens within an ongoing organisational structure. Chreim (2005) talks about a confluence of continuity and change in the narrative of change agents in a bank merger and describes how tradition and innovation find a balance. A church merger will introduce great change, and will affirm some continuing traditions, but of particular interest is how the church member balances the two in weaving their identity.

Others have suggested that making sense of our world can only be done through a retrospective looking back (Gioia, Corley & Fabbri, 2001). This implies that making sense of member identity may also be a retrospective act and that the history of the organisation and the member has an impact on identity formation. Each member has a personal history – both within and outside of the church – and also a unique interpretation of the church's identity.

Holding a 'business as usual' approach is often adopted in mergers – making a claim to a continuation of history in the face of change. Questions about historic continuity were raised by Jetten and Hutchison (2011) in the merger of two army regiments, with a finding that reassurance about historical continuity was a positive factor.

Attempts have also been made to bring a Social Identity approach into an understanding of historic connectivity (Ullrich, Wieseke & Van Dick, 2005) with a distinction between observable and projected continuity. This suggests that the experience discontinuity has an impact as much (if not greater) than the affirmation of continuity by the organisation.

Organisational identity has long been considered central, distinctive and enduring (Albert & Whetton, 1985). In a merger a church may have multiple centres, a variety of distinct expressions of church and a failing sense of endurance. It is the latter that relates to the temporal thread of identity, as people sense that the identity is fleeting.

For an identity to be enduring it must have both an historic and future existence. People make a choice in their (re)-interpretation of history (Shultz & Hernes, 2013) as to what is important or not, just as they define their choices for the future. Temporal threads are woven in the context of the present time and how membership now relates to the past and the future.

4.4 Purpose Threads

As part of the merging process members of Church Beta participated in a series of studies looking at the church's purpose. The author of these studies, Rick Warren, had an effective ministry at his Saddleback Church in the USA and developed the theory behind two books; *The Purpose Driven Life* and *The Purpose Driven Church*. The latter focuses on five generic purposes (Worship, Ministry, Evangelism, Fellowship and Discipleship). These broad purposes are reinforced by the encouragement of churches to develop clear mission statements (Warren, 1995).

The intent behind the Purpose Driven series is to unashamedly provide encouragement for church growth. Others have pointed out that such an internal focus diminishes the sense of purpose or mission (Lauser, 2010) in terms of caring for the community – part of the Christian calling.

As a concept, purpose is closely associated with motivation, although it could be argued that motivation is more individualistic. Kennon Callahan, a church advisor in the USA, posits that there are five motivations for church membership; community, commitment, reasonability, compassion and challenge (Callahan, 1983b). He suggests that these motivations are present for all members, but that two often take priority for individuals depending on context. New members often come to a church seeking community and compassion, while ministers are often motivated by challenge and reasonability, and lay leaders by commitment and community. This understanding highlights that an individual may have a different sense of purpose/motivation to another individual, and to the collective church.

A Gallup Poll in 2007¹³ found that the stated motivations for attending church of Americans included; for spiritual growth and guidance (23%), keeps me grounded/inspired (20%), to worship God (15%), it's my faith (15%), fellowship/community (13%), I believe in God (12%) and tradition (12%). Clearly there is a variety of motivations for people to attend church, and a variety of purposes for the collective church to aspire to.

¹³ Located at <http://www.gallup.com/poll/27124/just-why-americans-attend-church.aspx> accessed January 2015.

At an individual level there have been links established between role-identity, life purpose and well-being (Burrow & Hill, 2011, Thoits, 2012). When an individual can achieve a purpose, alone or with a group, there is a level of satisfaction and a sense of accomplishment. The purpose threads bind the member and church through the aspirational and achieved purposes of both.

4.5 Procedural Threads

The Presbyterian Church traces its lineage back to Martin Luther (1483-1546), John Calvin (1509-1564) and John Knox (1513-1572) who challenged the Roman Catholic Church at the time of the reformation and protested (hence the term Protestant) against their theology and practice. *Sola fides* [by faith alone] was a common call, but there was also a clear return to a Scripturally based ecclesiology. The Presbyterian Church in Scotland took the words of 1 Corinthians 14:40 to heart – “Let all things be done decently and in good order.”

It could be said that a denomination, like the Presbyterian Church, is simply an organisation of congregations that are united with a common system of beliefs and practices (Roozen & Nieman, 2005). Yet as much as Presbyterians are united, they are also diverse in how they organise themselves as a local church and this diversity has increased in recent decades. Thirty years ago, there was a stronger sense of Presbyterianism identity based on permanent organs, approved hymnals and liturgies, and historic architecture. Today there is a variety of music, a multitude of songs projected on a screen, and an increasing challenge to the traditional church building.

Despite the diversity, a church member is a participant of a group that follows certain procedures in acting as an organisation. These procedures or routines can be ostensive or performative (Safavi & Omidvar, 2016), where the former is an idealised view of how things are done and the latter is the actual action. This can be seen in church members comments about an idealised format of worship and the actual experience. Both forms of routine, however, affirm a member belief that they know what is happening in their organisation.

A third element of how we act is related to procedural justice (Is the way we act fair?) and is intertwined with the valuative threads (below). Identity information is suggested to emanate from evaluations of procedural fairness (Tyler & Blader, 2003) and can be distorted by perceptions of unfair processes. The experience of injustice is considered an inhibiting factor to developing stronger member identity. People evaluate the processes both for their fairness *per se* and for the fairness of their implementation, these have been defined as formal and informal sources of procedural justice (Tyler, & Blader, 2003).

The procedural threads of member identity are considered to be woven in the regular processes of the organisation. The procedures make sense to the member and weave with the other threads of their member identity.

4.6 Valuative Threads

A concept arose in my research that centred on a sense of commitment or worth – which became the valuative thread. Further reading led to an understanding of social capital and the investment that people put into the church and the return they get back. A background of social capital is given in this section.

The use of the term ‘social capital’ was made popular by Robert Putnam who considered the features of social life – networks, norms, and trust – as enablers of bringing people together (Putnam, 1995). Putnam identifies people working together for a common goal as the power of social capital, and as such he develops his ideas from an individual perspective. There are two forms of this social capital, bridging and bonding. Bridging links communities of interest together, while bonding holds people within their communities. The 1995 paper largely centres round the civic interest of Americans, but the concept seems adaptable to analysis of the church.

Putnam notes that Social Capital theory basically affirms that the more we join with other people the more we trust them (Putnam, 1995), but it also notes that trusting people encourages joining with them. This carries with it an idea of competition, like centripetal and centrifugal forces. Putnam also notes that better educated people are more likely to be joiners and trusters, partly because of their better economic circumstances but more because of their educational upbringing (Putnam, 1995).

The religious economy involves human capital being invested into religious practice and the production of satisfaction. Parents may invest time and money into a church that allows their children to be taught in a Sunday school that instils values and teaching that they believe is important. Equally, church participants invest their time and money into a spiritual endeavour that brings rewards, either in this world or the next. While a Marxist analysis of the church may focus on the institutional power of the clergy, Iannaccone (1990) is clear in describing the religious human capital of the participants in a church.

Robert Woodberry, writing to a Spiritual Capital Planning meeting, affirmed that Spiritual Capital is distinct from social or cultural capital in that it has a theological imperative and an affirmed

difference (Woodberry, 2003). There is something more that happens in a church setting than would happen in a club (like Lions or Rotary). There is an acknowledgment that other factors are at play, but the unique nature of spirituality is evident.

Woodberry also reminds us that spiritual capital is a metaphor. Woodberry comments that the metaphor provides an explanation for religion being an investment and having a distinct end (Woodberry, 2003). He also outlines the limitations of the metaphor – especially when there can be an implication that religious behaviour can be whittled down to a cold economic analysis.

Churches are reliant on their volunteer base to fulfil many of their organisational functions. Many churches will employ a minister and a lot will also employ some sort of administrator, but there are still many jobs to do. The variety of tasks undertaken is therefore often done by volunteers, many organised through the roster systems. In some busy churches the volunteer hours can be quite substantial, but it is seldom that people take time to reflect on how busy they are. A retired participant in this research commented, “I’m pretty much working in the church now” as he explained his voluntary activities, “the pay’s not great, but there’s a lot of satisfaction (AStA6).”

Studies in work situations have shown that when an employee feels that the organisation is willing to value and support them, they will develop a greater psychological attachment to the organisation (Edwards & Peccei, 2010). An employee may well find that value in a wage increase, but this is not an option in a voluntary organisation.

As noted by Tyler and Blader (2003) there is a link between social comparison and an evaluation of loss or gain of resources that a person experiences in an organisation, either in absolute terms or in relation to others. When a person invests more resources into a group their sense of identity with that group increases (Tyler, & Blader, 2003). Studies affirm that the greater the involvement of people in the process of change (individual or organizational) the higher the commitment (Whitney, 1998).

One reason for a disinvestment in the church was the loss of a person’s local church building. Being further away from the church (having to travel longer) provides a discouragement for attendance due to cost and time, which has been named as distance decay (Leonard, 2006). This can be considered in a cost-benefit analysis, but only when the evaluation is more than monetary. The simple question of the individual is, therefore, “is it worthwhile for me to go to church over there?” The answer lies across the threads of identity, but also in an element of religious worth which is beyond the scope of this research – such as the standard of worship, the perception of spirituality or the quality of pastoral care.

4.7 Conclusion

This chapter has introduced the specific threads of the metaphor and explored some of the literature that gives a deeper understanding. The six threads are an explicit understanding of the content of member identity and those threads can also be identified in other research.

In a recent research paper on identity in a youth program (Futch, 2016) a typical model of collective identity developed through self-categorisation was presented. In the findings, however, were comments such as “participants who entered the space” (locative), “all here for the same reason” (purpose), “how lucky we are” (valuative), “constructed a story of their participation” (temporal), “a specific program” (procedural), along with “bringing people into community” (relational).

The threads metaphor must be understood to have multiple threads of each category – e.g. there are various locative threads that are woven into member identity. The threads also reflect individual difference by having a different significance to different people – e.g. some may be more connected by the sense of purpose than the relationships they form. The metaphor also suggests that the weaving is an ongoing process of individual formation within the context of an organisation.

5 Methodology

This chapter describes the iterative process undertaken throughout the research. It describes how the empirical data, academic literature and personal reflection played a role in developing the threads of identity metaphor.

The research began with a desire to explore how the connection of a member to the church is challenged in a church merger – but it quickly became clear that there is a wide range of understanding about what membership entails. The psychological concept of identity, and more particularly social identity, provided the initial impetus to the study. The early interviews in Church Alpha confirmed thoughts that there was more to discern than a simple in-group development. Identity was the key concept for the early part of this project, but as analysis continued the understanding of identity encompassed elements of attachment and belonging which allowed a broader understanding of what was encountered.

The concluding sections of this chapter give an outline of the two merged churches used as case studies in the research and an overview of the interview participants. A description is given of the data that was collected and a rationale for using it in this research. This is followed by a brief explanation of how the results were collated and the research written up. The chapter concludes with comments about the researcher.

5.1 A preliminary project

As an adjunct to the main research an opportunity was taken at a national gathering of church people¹⁴ that included both ministers and lay people to undertake a preliminary survey. Fifty people (out of about 65 present) wrote down how they would describe their local church's identity, using bullet-points. There was a frankness of answers that was quite surprising as people gave a critical evaluation of their church's identity. This perhaps reflects the fact that these people had travelled to attend the event and were therefore already actively thinking about the life of the church. While there was a broad range of descriptions, some themes did emerge.

¹⁴ Uniting Congregations of Aotearoa New Zealand biennial Forum held in Hamilton, 17-20 October, 2013.

The responses were collated and a thematic analysis was undertaken. This was done by sorting the words into broad categories and trying to identify emerging themes. The emerging themes reflected both positive and negative attributes about church identity.

A key theme was **pastoral**, dealing with who people saw themselves to be in relation to others. Two key words used were *community* and *family*. People wrote of their church being *inclusive, welcoming, hospitable, friendly* – but also *mono-cultural, inward-looking* and *sometimes exclusive*.

The responses suggested a thread that was consistent with Social Identity Theory about people being in a group and experiencing an in-group sensation. There is an obvious dynamic in a merger when two groups come together, so the intention for the interviews was to explore the relationships between the two (or more) groups in the merging churches.

Many related their local church's identity to its **physical** presence. They wrote of *a community landmark, a beautiful or historic building, towering, the big church on the corner, accessible, a central building, or the church at the beach*. There were also some more negative comments about the physical existence, including *flood prone, old, and a tired building*.

From these responses began a formulation of a thread that was based on the physical reality of a church – most notably the building itself. This led to an exploration of how that physical expression of the church would be affected by a merger.

A third theme arose from the descriptions of the local church being *traditional, ecumenical, liberal, flexible, conventional, even boring and tired*. This reflects an awareness of how people go about **doing** things in the church.

Personal and work experience with uniting churches, where two or more denominations share together, suggested that how things are done is important for people. In uniting churches many people will speak of doing Presbyterian or Methodist communion – most often reflecting not a theological division, but whether people are served at the communion rail or in their pews. It became of interest to explore in the interviews if how people did things in their local church was important and if it had an impact on their sense of identity.

A further theme related to the sense of **purpose** that people have for being a church. Their descriptions included; *involved in the community, serving, witnessing, community facing, mission driven, evangelical* - but also *unnoticed by the wider community and dying*.

In the Presbyterian Church there is a current thrust to encourage churches to develop a clear community mission focus and from casual observation there is certainly vibrancy within churches

that have set clear goals. This encouraged exploration in the interviews of the importance of having mission goals and whether that builds member identity in a merging context.

There were comments that were identified as having an **historical** theme; *proud history, traditional, adapting, protective of the past*, but also *looking to the past, unsure of the future* and *last person turn the light off*.

These descriptions suggested that our sense of belonging is shaped by our history. This created an interest in exploring how important the history of a church was in coming to a merger and how that affected people's sense of identity.

A final group of descriptions included; *supportive, very busy, hard-working, dedicated, loyal*, but also *tired, too comfortable and dysfunctional*. These thoughts were seen to be about the level of commitment and energy in the local church. These responses came from a group of people who had given up four days to attend a church conference – they were committed to the life and work of the church. I became curious about whether their commitment impacted on their sense of identity as a church member and their responses to the merger process.

The six themes from this simple research enhanced the thoughts about how members express their identity and the formulation of areas to explore in later interviews. From these six themes emerged the threads of member identity metaphor.

5.2 The level of attachment

It quickly became apparent in my research that identity attachment is found at many levels of an organisation. In a church, for instance, people belong to many groups that develop their own identity – parish council, choir, prayer group, bible study group, or musicians. But at one end of the threads of identity there is always an individual member. The threads are woven by the member into the collective identity of the local church.

That collective identity was labelled as church identity and it was, at the beginning, easy to assume that church identity was observable. But through the interviews it became apparent that church identity is far more elusive than was expected.

Seeking to isolate a “church identity” become problematic in my research as it could only be done through individual reports. Members in Church Alpha commented that their church was friendly, while one member suggested that they were “quite clique-y (AStB5).” It became clear that church

identity cannot be understood as a reified average but remains a shared social construction with allowance for individual difference.

Church identity is not an objective phenomenon to be measured, but a subjective perception to be experienced. Each church member has a different view of the church to which they belong, and different reasons as to why they attach themselves to the church.

A woman from Church Alpha commented;

“Somehow the congregation has got to be complete, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. We've got to feel that we belong to each other, to help each other, to serve each other (AStA3).”

Her longing for the church was for it to be a caring community, reflecting the care that she had received at the death of her husband some years previously. In contrast, another member of Church A commented;

“The community centre is so busy, you need a supportive church for that alone to ensure you've got people like us to go in and do things, like music for kids and that sort of stuff (AStB4).”

He expressed his hope that the church would be a mission focused group that was more active in the community. These two responses reflect the individual differences associated with the perception of church identity – for one the church is a pastoral network, for the other it is a mission agency. While these people belong to the same church, their perception of that church's identity is quite different.

My research explores six aspects of church identity that provide a means of expressing individual difference. Identity work is understood as the weaving of threads of identity between the member (the individual level) and the church (the major collective level) in such a way that individual difference is affirmed. Each member weaves with the same threads of identity, but they do so in different ways.

5.3 How is identity perceived?

Interviews were conducted from 2013-2015 and analysis of the data was an ongoing process. This meant that data gathering and analysis were not independent of each other and the threads of identity emerged from an iterative process. This method enabled new ideas to develop from the data and to be explored with later interview participants.

A brief field diary was kept following interviews and participation in church activities. Interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed and filed both as individual records and as a combined document. The latter document provided a means to search for key words throughout all the interviews. As themes began to emerge from the data relevant sentences were extracted into a composite document for that theme and combined into broader categories or removed. Table 1 gives the first iteration of themes.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Name • Place • History • Mission • Community • Process • Purpose • Context • Active or inactive members 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building • Governance • Energy • Age • Size (numbers) • Emotions • Commitment • Leadership
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Table 1. Emerging Themes from the interviews

Through ongoing reading, specific elements of identity were seen to emerge from the data. Some concepts were linked together (such as process and governance) and some rejected as not being key aspects of church identity (such as age or gender). The reduction in numbers saw the emergence of the six key threads that form the basis of the analytical metaphor.

The designation of only six threads is a subjective call but working with the data and explaining the research informally to other people it came to make sense and seemed a comprehensive coverage.

The preliminary and interview data, the ongoing reading and a great deal of thinking provided clarity to the understanding that identity is held in six threads. These six threads encapsulate the ways in which individual church members attach themselves to the collective church through a process of weaving or identity work. No two individuals weave their identity in the same way, but all weave with the same threads. The metaphor seeks to suggest a dynamic interaction between the individual member and the collective church through a process of identity work across the six threads.

5.4 Exploring the effect of a merger

The interview data provided two avenues for understanding identity. The first was the classification of the six threads of identity and the second was the opportunity to explore the identity work that was undertaken in the process of a church merger.

In its simplest understanding, members of the pre-merge churches become members of the merged church at the inauguration of the latter. On paper this simple process transfers the names from one roll to another. But experience in the mergers of this research and in a long ministry has shown that people processes are never simple and a membership roll does not reflect the attachment an individual may have with the church.

A merger has implications on the relational thread of identity as a new group of people are formed into the church. The merger affects the locative thread through a rationalising process for the church buildings and finding a church name. It impacts the temporal thread by bringing together separate histories and developing a continuation of each story into the future. The merger challenges the purpose thread by requiring people to articulate more clearly the purpose of the church. It forces people to consider their normal procedures and acknowledge that there are other ways of doing things. And a merger provokes people to reconsider their investment or commitment in the church by analysis of the efforts and rewards that are experienced.

It is also important to note that no two church mergers are the same. The two case studies of this research should not be taken as being 'typical church mergers.' They reflect unique socio-historical contexts, but it is suggested that the threads of member identity metaphor is able to encapsulate the diversity of these contexts.

5.5 The merging churches

The first study was of Church Alpha, located in a large New Zealand city. The two pre-merge churches (St A and St B) existed in neighbouring suburbs and talks had begun about merging in 2010. Both church buildings were badly damaged in earthquakes and services were being held in the associated halls on both sites. St A had a long serving minister (30+ years) who retired in 2010 and has had a dwindling and ageing congregation for a number of years. Without the merger proposal it was likely that St A would not have been able to have a full time minister in the parish. St B had their minister for around 5 years and had a developing ministry, although it was still only a small

church. The minister's wife had recently trained to also become a minister and at the time of the research was employed half time at St B and half time at St A as interim moderator.¹⁵

In September 2013 a monthly combined service was begun, in October 2013 a name was chosen and in December 2013 the two ministers were inducted (formally positioned) to the merged parish. It had been agreed that there would be no shifting of worship until late 2014, so services were still conducted at both St A (65 people) and St B (75 people) on a Sunday morning, along with a breakfast gathering at St B at 8am on Sunday. In 2014 monthly combined services were begun at a local funeral chapel or high school, with an average attendance on a Sunday morning of around 114 people. The interviews were conducted from mid-2013 to late-2014.

Church Alpha was chosen as a case study because it was in the early stages of merging. Each church merger is unique, and Church Alpha provided some unique attributes. It was a merger by stages, there was an ongoing ministry, and there were plans to maintain buildings but to join the worshipping congregations. Despite these unique facets of a merger, Church Alpha still provided an opportunity to observe the early years of a merging church.

The second study was of Church Beta, located in a provincial New Zealand city. Four Presbyterian churches (St C, St D, St E, and St F) merged into one unit in 2010. There were five significant church buildings at the time of the merger and consideration was given to reducing that number. One church was sold, and after the 2011 earthquake two more were put out of commission. This meant that two sites existed and were adequate for the needs of the parish. A lot of paperwork is available on the process of merging for the four churches and the strategies followed. Numbers attending had decreased, but there was a strong resolve by those who remained to make the merger work. In 2013 Church Beta employed four ministers¹⁶ and had two worshipping congregations on Sunday mornings with a combined average attendance of around 150, one designated a traditional service and the other a contemporary service. The latter congregation has a younger age profile. The interviews were conducted from late-2013 to late-2014.

Church Beta was chosen as a second case study because it was four years further through a merging process than Church Alpha, but still considered itself to be merging. There are historic links between the researcher and the church, and this meant both a familiarity with the church and an ease of access to participants in the study.

¹⁵ In Presbyterian churches a moderator chairs the Session (council of elders) and an interim moderator takes on this role when there is a ministerial vacancy.

¹⁶ Two full time and two at 75%. Three were in their position before the merger was enacted.

5.6 Participants

Participants were originally identified by the ministers of both churches, with suggested names being contacted and interviews arranged. There were further names suggested by members and these were followed up. A notice was also printed in church bulletins asking for volunteers, and this elicited three additional participants.

Thirty-one people were interviewed from the two churches. Of the thirteen from Church Alpha, 4 were from St A and 9 were from St B. In the Church Beta study, 5 were from St C, 3 from St D, 5 from St E and 3 from St F (one came into the merged church). The gender and age categories are given in Table 2. The age distribution reflects the actual distribution in the two churches, where there is a predominance of older members.

	Total	Women	Men	40's	50's	60's	70's	80's
Church Alpha	13	9	4	1	3	4	4	1
Church Beta	18	10	8	3	4	6	2	3

Table 2. Total, gender and age of participants.

The age profile of the participants is clearly older, but that is also representative of the churches themselves. One of the key driving forces of the mergers had been the aging of the congregations and the dwindling people resources.

Five ministers (AStA1, AStB8, BStF1, BStF2, and BStD3) were interviewed and all had been appointed to the churches for less than ten years. There were three female and two male ministers, two in their forties, two in their fifties and one in the sixties.

Most of those interviewed had taken some form of leadership role in the merging churches over the previous two years, although there were 6 respondents who had no leadership roles. The number of years they have been involved in the parish is noted in Table 3.

Years	0-10	11-20	21-30	31-40	40+
	4	3	4	10	5

Table 3. Years of involvement by lay people

5.7 Interviews

A qualitative study allows the nuances of the local context to be explicated and the perceptions and experiences of people to be explored (Bartunek, 2012). While it is sometimes argued that a case-based study risks being too specific, it allows a depth of analysis that would not be possible across a wider sample.

The primary source of data was qualitative interviews with individuals participating in a church merger. Qualitative interviewing seeks to elicit narrative stories that provide data for gaining meaning into the respondents' understanding of their life-world relevant to the topic (Warren & Karner, 2010). This entailed listening for the narrative that church members use to describe their sense of identity.

An interview, unlike a survey or questionnaire, provides a greater flexibility in how the data is collected, what is shared and how it is interpreted. All research, including both qualitative and quantitative studies, has elements of subjectivity, held by both researcher and respondents (Diefenbach, 2009). This subjectivity is celebrated in qualitative interviews and is an essential part of the framework of the research.

The interviews were conducted in a friendly and informal manner, usually in the person's own home. The interview began with introductions, a description of the research and the signing of the consent forms. The interviews were semi-structured, being led by a series of prompting questions. This had the benefit of being able to follow a line of thought and reflect more fully on certain topics. Each interview was recorded and then later transcribed.

Informed consent was given by participants at the beginning of every interview and an offer made to provide the recording or verbatim of the conversation following the presentation of the thesis. All raw data will be destroyed on the successful submission of the thesis. Confidentiality will be respected and no reference will identify who provided the response.

The opportunity to interview the disaffected and disinterested was limited in this research. Without first-hand accounts of why people had left I was reliant on the reports of others. The data largely reflects the views of people who were active in doing identity work.

The first task of the interview was to seek the individual's view of the church's identity before the merger and their place within the collective entity. The leading questions were;

- Tell me about ... (the pre-merged church). What was it like? What was special? What were the things that made the church what it was?

The conversation sought to elicit an understanding of how the member saw their church and how they were connected to the church. The duration of their membership, the level of their commitment, and their sense of belonging were explored. In this dialogue it was hoped that the threads of identity would be seen as they explored what it was about the church that held them to it.

The second task was to evaluate the individual's perception of the pre-merger identity of the other church(es) involved in the merging process. This allows a focus on the perceived differences between the two merging churches. This part of the conversation started with;

- Tell me about ... (the 'other' church). How were they similar or different? What were their challenges?

Within this conversation was an opportunity to explore the cross-over of threads – with the hope that people will use their own sense of connection to evaluate the other church. For instance, it was expected that a person who appreciated a particular type of music in their church would use that as a comparative measure in assessing the other church.

The third task of the interview process was to explore how the merging process is affecting the individual's sense of church identity and their place within the newly merged church. It was expected that there will be key areas of contention where identity work is undertaken by individuals to both re-weave their own connection with the church and to formulate the church in a way that is functional for them. The leading questions of this section are;

- How is the merger going? What are the good things that are happening? What are the difficulties? Are you feeling part of the merged church?

This third section largely explored the identity work that was being undertaken – exploring how the threads were being re-woven in the merging situation. For example, the way in which the history of the pre-merged church was being handled could be explored and the impact that is having. Here there were opportunities to explore the emerging issues and consider them in terms of the proposed threads of identity.

The final questions encouraged reflection on the developing understanding of the threads of church identity and allowed space to ask about elements related to the threads;

- How are relationships developing? How are you dealing with questions about the property? Do you feel that history is being protected and connected to the future? Have there been

issues about how things are done? Is there a sense of mission in the new church? Has previous commitment been valued?

These questions were kept reasonably general in the hope that people would open up with insights that will direct further investigation of the threads of church identity.

5.8 Observation, Conversation and Written Material

I was able to attend church services at both churches and spent time over cups of tea having informal conversations with members. In the church services I was identified as a researcher into the merger process and that elicited some conversation. My observations were noted in a brief diary and some verbatim conversations written down. This data helped in the interpretation of what was said in the more formal interview situation.

One example of this was the various observations in Church Beta of which pews people sat in on a Sunday morning. The grouping of former church members in areas of the church was noted, but the explanation for this action was diverse (as will be explored in the results section).

Sermons, newsletters, pamphlets, reports and Sunday bulletins have been read in both hard copy and online. Only some of these have been cited as a data source, but all have provided insight as I have sought to analyse the data. The written material reflects the strategies of the ministers and church leaders in directing the merging process.

5.9 Analysis

The transcripts were read for emerging threads, which over the period of the research had a variety in number and names. As the conceptual threads emerged I was able to read more widely on particular themes. For instance, comments about the buildings were a significant part of the narratives and in my wider reading I explored more deeply the concept of place identity – and that led to the locative thread, which included buildings as a place.

When the six threads began to have clarity in my thinking, I re-read the transcripts using the threads as a form of thematic analysis and sought to interpret how people were doing identity work with the various threads. This entailed considering their thoughts, emotions and behaviours in connection with the six threads.

5.10 Writing Up

The metaphorical threads provided the framework for both the analysis and write-up of my research. Pulling apart the data into the six threads is somewhat artificial – identity is a holistic concept – but it allows for some specific analysis on aspects of identity. The order in which the threads are presented is of no significance, but I have sought to be consistent in how I addressed each thread.

Discussion on the threads was considered in the context of the mergers and with the intent of exploring the identity work being done – that is to say, the emotional, cognitive and behavioural responses to the detachment and reattachment of the threads of identity.

Any organisational merger is a complex series of events that can never be encapsulated in a single piece of research. I have chosen to be specific in exploring identity as the psychological construct under study, but that has been shown to be a complex topic in itself. The journey of exploration in this research has not been linear and there is an intricate balance between the data, literature and my own creative thinking in developing the threads of identity metaphor as an analytical tool for exploring identity and the impact of a church merger. I have opted to present a précis of the journey in this chapter – a description of how the ideas arose through the research.

5.11 The Researcher

I have been a Presbyterian minister for 30 years serving in parishes in New Zealand, Canada and Scotland, and more recently as Executive Officer in national and regional church offices. I value my identity and membership in the Presbyterian Church and in a local church congregation. It is my own strongly woven threads of identity that have informed my understanding of church member identity.

As a minister and psychology student there were implications on how people perceived my research. One participant showed some reticence about being part of psychology research and two participants commented on me being from Wellington (which was seen as the church head office). It also meant that there were more in depth discussions on a wide variety of topics beyond the specific research questions.

6 Church Alpha Analysis

This chapter presents the analysis of the data collected from Church Alpha, a merger of two Presbyterian churches, St A and St B¹⁷. There is a point when a merger officially happens, but the focus of this study is on the psychological impact that occurs during the merging process. The case study was conducted at the beginning stages of the merger before many official actions of merging were undertaken, but the congregations were working together where possible and the intention was clear. This allowed opportunity to explore the initial impact of the merger on member identity.

6.1 Introduction

Consistent with the metaphor, the analysis of the data collected can be understood as the observation of the threads of identity that have been woven into the fabric of church life by the members. Each of the threads are considered separately – although this is a contrived separation as they are intricately interwoven and dependent on each other.

In the first section for each thread observation is made about how the pattern of identity was woven in the pre-merge churches. This reflects how people saw their member identity or sense of belonging to the original churches. To give a clear structure there is a particular focus on how the pattern of the threads is central, enduring, distinctive and coherent (CEDC) (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Gioia, Corley & Fabbri, 2001).

The second section for each thread considers the impact of the merger on the emotions, thoughts and behaviours of people – a time when the fabric of member identity is frayed at the edges by the implication of the merger. Examples are given of how each thread impacts the members' experience of the church. Affective identification (and also behavioural identification) could be theorised as being distinct from cognitive identification (Harquail, 1998) but while isolating these elements for analysis, the holistic nature of the individual is upheld.

The third section for each thread considers how identity work was being undertaken as people sought to re-weave their member identity into the merged church. Identity work is understood to be a process of sense-making, and in the context of a merger it is making sense of the conflict between what is similar and what is different (Langley, Golden-Biddle, et al, 2012).

¹⁷ Church Alpha, St A and St B are pseudonymns. Participants are labelled either AStA# or AStB# reflecting their church of origin.

The fourth section considers the impact of the church leadership and their specific focus on each thread. Ministers often play a role in church life as change managers (Simpson, 2012) and are generally considered as experts by church members – even when they have little experience or training in management, organisational dynamics or mergers. One of the challenges for change managers is to act as agents of both change and continuity (Jacobs, van Witteloostuijn & Christe-Zeyse, 2013) and to help people make sense of what is happening.

The intent of the analysis is to exemplify how the threads of identity are challenged in a merger and are re-woven by members as they establish a sense of belonging to the new church. It is hoped that the analysis affirms the utility of the threads metaphor for giving understanding of the psychological processes of a church merger and the impact on church identity.

6.2 Relational Threads

The relational threads are seen to be woven in the connection between the church member and the wider church. There is a conceptual similarity between the relational threads and the basis of Social Identity theories.

a. The pre-merge pattern of relational threads

For many people their family is CEDC to their own sense of identity. The use of ‘family’¹⁸ as a metaphor for the church has been around since the Paul wrote to the church in Galatia. It is perhaps one of the most popular metaphors used in the Church and was certainly a key word used in the preliminary project of this research. Members from both St A and St B described their Church Alpha as family.

“It’s family for me. They are the people that have shared with me, supported me, they’ve been there. I’ve seen the kids grow up and it’s great to see them come back – with their children. Christmas Eve – you see the children come in, it’s lovely to see them grown up (AStB7).”

“It’s probably more of a family feel here in that they’re in and out of each other’s houses regularly (AStA1).”

There was a clear indication that many members’ pattern of identity was woven with this strong relational thread. Members of both churches had developed connections over many years through sharing in worship, camps, child-raising and missional activities. They generally viewed the idea of the church family as being CEDC to their sense of belonging in a social context.

¹⁸ There are arguments in Church literature that suggest that the use of family is inappropriate in our current social setting, but it was a concept popularly used in the churches of this study.

The sense of being a family was a central hub that connected the people together. In both churches the composition of the church family had been stable over many years – while deaths had clearly reduced the size, there were few new members to unsettle the familial atmosphere. The strong sense of church family meant that the merger had a significant impact on the relational threads of identity.

While the members of both churches used the family metaphor, there was a different understanding as to how the church family functions. In St B it was noted that people shared much of their lives in the church family beyond the Sunday morning worship. There were activities throughout the week that drew people together and formed them into a cohesive group. But this strong bond was not always seen positively. A couple of participants commented that St B could, at times, be a bit “clique-y” and that it was hard for new people to enter. A younger, more recent member who had begun attending church through personal contact with the minister, commented;

“The older ones were a bit stand-offish when I first started, but I got on well with the minister and there was a group about our age – that made a difference (AStB9).”

Many of the St B congregation had developed a sense of a church family through a wide variety of social activities – which highlights that even our family identity is woven with the various threads of identity.

At St A the people also used the family metaphor, but for them it seemed that the family was the gathering on Sunday morning and connections made at significant life events. An older member of the church commented about the funeral of her husband which happened not long after she had arrived in the church;

“Everything we wanted was done and the church was very supportive. We became part of the family almost, we felt that the church was our family, which was lovely (AStA3).”

For St A the pastoral work of the elders was an essential element of being the Church and it was the elders who ensured that visitors were welcomed and included. This meant that the church services were the place where members developed relationships.

The relational thread in St A was observed to be primarily woven in their Sunday morning worship, while the relationships at St B were often developed in outreach or social activities. This simple comparison seeks to highlight that the relational threads were woven differently in the two churches, and the difference could be attributed (in the context of the threads metaphor) to the influence of the other threads of identity.

b. Challenges to the relational threads

In both St A and St B there had been a stable membership who knew each other well and had clear patterns in those relationships. This meant that they had an experience of what it was to be a church family, but when the churches came together there was a different feeling. In many ways it is an obvious statement – half of the merged group were strangers to the other half. But in saying that, they were also coming to terms with the idea that this was a new, blended church family.

One particular feature of this study was that the worshipping congregations largely continued unchanged (albeit in their church halls) following the administrative merger. The occasional combined services didn't feel like a merger to many.

“I don't feel like we are merging, that's me personally, how I feel. I don't think we're working together, we're still operating totally independently (AStB5).”

At the combined services, however, the reality of the merger was evident. There was an emotional impact on those who were comforted by the familiar faces they met on a Sunday morning – while one participant reflected on how much he liked meeting new people each Sunday, another noted that she found it difficult to recognise people in the “crowd of strangers (AStB6)” and that upset her. This reflects the idiosyncratic reality that relational threads are woven in different ways by different members of the same church.

The coming together of the two churches also challenged members in their behaviour, as they had to interact with members from the ‘other’ church. It was clear that members understood that they did need to talk to those they did not know and find ways to work together.

At a cognitive level, members were learning to think inclusively of the two groups. One member commented;

I don't know what progress we're making with getting them to change – even now we're talking about “them” and “us” (AStB2)

He realised that his language had not kept up with the merger of the churches and adjusted as we spoke. This reflects the cognitive challenge of thinking of unity with lingering perceptions of separation. There were also new names to remember, processes to follow and socio-political relationships to think about. The latter, even in a church, involves identifying the power brokers, workers and negative voices.

c. Identity work

Identity work that is undertaken on the relational thread is the task of making sense of being a member in a new church, while still strongly identifying with the old. It is clear that “whenever two or more organizations form a relationship, the result is a new organizational creature which partakes

of both partners but is different from either (Gould, Ebers & Clinchy, 1999, 701).” But there is a danger of reifying the socially constructed group into a ‘creature’ and neglecting that the church family is a social construction.

The members of St B were already grappling with identity issues observed in connection with a breakfast group that met at 8am. This was targeted at young families and a small group of older people helped with serving and cleaning up. This was seen as a missional outreach, but there was some disappointment expressed that attendees of the breakfast group had not bolstered the numbers of the 10am worship service. There was a very real perception by some that the breakfast attendees were not part of the congregation.

“I think mostly the congregation will accept them if they were asked to, but if they don’t come at 10 o’clock they’re not really involved (AStB3).”

This was identified as an issue with three or four participants, with one considering;

“There’s a lot of tension here because there is a camp that actively want to involve the [breakfast group] people in our wider activities ... whereas there are some people who want to actively keep them separate because they feel they don’t want to be a part of it (AStB6).”

This tension is mentioned not in any critical way, but to highlight the fact that even before the merger there was active weaving of identity as people tried to establish who belonged to the church. This weaving is done both at the individual level – asking if they are a member of the group, and at the collective level – asking if others are also members of the group.

In the merging process, as members seek to make sense of changes to relationships, they often reflected on similarities and differences that exist between the two churches. A few sentences from one active church member:

“I’m not so sure we’re that good at looking after our own people, our own spiritual needs, but I see St A’ as the opposite, very good at looking after its own people, in terms of, if you look at the activities they run, they’re often for their own congregation. They’re less outward facing. But in lots of ways we’re very similar. Congregations of pretty much middle class, once again, monocultural, probably similar outlooks on lots of things (AStB6).”

Identity work is accomplished on the relational threads by members making sense of the similarities of the two groups of people that are merging and minimising the differences. In language terms it is the reformulation of ‘us’ that can be inclusive of ‘them.’ This identity work happens across the spectrum of affect, behaviour and cognition.

d. Leadership

Ministers often play a role in church life as change managers (Simpson, 2012) and are generally considered as experts – even when they have little experience or training in management,

organisational dynamics or mergers. Ministers are trained in pastoral care, and the relational threads are pastoral in nature.

The church leadership expressed a desire to have the family feel of the two congregations developed in the combined church (without necessarily realising that the families has significant differences). A principle strategy was to have people get to know each other and in discussing merger strategy Church Alpha leaders noted;

“We’re trying to get them to know each other, cos we know that if they get to know each other on a social level the rest of it will be a whole lot easier (AStA1).”

“We realised that it was really important that people get to know each other, so we made sure there were social events (AStA2).”

A series of lunches was planned that mixed people between the two churches. There were positive comments about this and a feeling that it was effective at introducing people. This strategy did not always work, however. One lady, after inviting people to her home for lunch, found that there were two teenage boys who, as teenage boys, were non-communicative and unappreciative – “I’m sure if my grandchildren did that they’d get a stern telling off (AStA3).” This negativity was transferred to conclude that all of “them” (the other church) were lacking in pastoral sensitivity.

Perhaps the challenge here is that the strategy sought to develop a relational bonding without considering the other threads of identity. Hosting people in individual homes meant that there was neither a common location nor a regular procedure. There may well have been opportunity to share their mutual history, but there was a difference in effort between the host and the hosted (and the investment of one woman was clearly seen as a negative).

There was disappointment expressed by church leaders that not everyone shared in the introductory lunches, and that some people did not come to the combined services. While not stated directly, there was an implication, at times, that this was a form of resistance to the changes. However, another leader commented;

“There are people that we don’t see as often as we used to – they don’t come to the combined services. One man said he couldn’t hear, but the sound system is better, so that’s not the real reason. I just think they’re working it through (AStA2).”

This leader had understood some of the identity work that was happening for the members and noted that it was much harder for older members to deal with the change. She pointed out that some people had said they were going to leave and go to another church, but when asked a few weeks later they committed to staying. The leader commented;

“It’s just part of people processing, that’s why getting that balance of time was so important – that they don’t feel rushed, but we move on (AStA2).”

One seemingly trivial action of the church leaders was to print the notices of both congregations on the same piece of paper (handed out at Sunday services). One participant commented;

“You can see in the notices that they pretty much do what we do, so that makes the thought of merging a bit easier (AStB4).”

Here was a process that indicated that there was a great deal of similarity in how and what the churches did.

e. Summary

The relational threads of identity were highlighted in the merger process as the two church groups worked through the impact of combining as one group. The merger could be seen to have emotional, behavioural and cognitive consequences on the members sense of identity and demanded that they do identity work to reweave their identity and sense of belonging.

6.3 Locative Threads

The locative threads can be understood as being woven between the individual church member and their sense of place. The underlying assumption is that physical location has an impact on a church member’s identity and this was explored in the circumstance of the merger.

a. The pre-merge pattern of locative threads

For both St A and St B the earthquake that struck Christchurch led to the demolition of their buildings. The demolition of St A’ had been determined by the earthquake, but the decision on St B had been debated in a church meeting which balanced the love of the building with the cost of repair. A minister observed that the decision to demolish St B had been “a very head decision” which was a logical course of action, but that “there was a huge emotional reaction that took everybody by surprise (AStA1).”

Prior to the merger, therefore, the church members were already re-weaving their identity with locative threads as they sought to make sense of the need for a new church. Both churches grieved for the lost buildings, in some ways in a similar way to those who lost their family home in the earthquake. It was interesting to note that the identity work happened after the building was demolished, one person who had lost their own home noting:

“You don’t really move on until that’s all happened. That’s what happened with the church, people didn’t move on until it was gone (AStB5).”

While the buildings were demolished, the churches continued to hold worship services in the adjoining halls. On visiting a service in the hall it was observed that people worked at making the hall into a worship venue (seating, lectern, table) and several commented that they liked the new intimacy of the hall setting and didn't want to go back to pews. An older St A member noted

“when you pull it down it's got to cease to exist, and that's happened with the church, it's ceased to exist, but we are still trying to retain the spirit of what was there in our hall (AStA3).”

This highlights the sense of endurance that is held in the locative thread – an endurance borne out of weekly worship in a church venue over many years. In St B there was a greater concern about working space for their mission activities (rather than a worship venue) – with the church demolished they had fewer options. One member, who was a keen volunteer in a number of the mission activities said:

“I suppose for St B it's quite clear that the Community Centre is an integral part of its identity (AStB6).”

This highlighted a difference that existed between the two churches – in St A the worship was their central activity and their locative thread was woven primarily through where worship was held, while for St B there was both worship and mission activities that demanded a location. This demonstrated a distinctive element of the locative thread as part of member identity.

For members in both churches there was an element of coherence in maintaining a church presence at the original sites. Most provided reasoned arguments why it was important to maintain a presence at that location in the community. The locative thread for members was derived from their CEDC identity to the church building and its location.

b. Challenges to the locative threads

Most mergers need to deal with a surfeit of property – and this especially true of church mergers. Many members in Church Alpha acknowledged that the destruction of their churches by the earthquake had provided an opportunity for change. At the time of the research the significant questions for people were where they would worship and where mission would be run. The church leadership were clear in the intention that the worshipping congregations needed to combine, but that mission should happen in the two local communities.

The stated intention meant that people needed to think through this division of church identity between worship and mission (which is woven in part on the purpose thread) and the location of that purpose. Several older members said that they could not understand why the churches were not

simply rebuilt and at least one member had failed to grasp that worship would not be held locally. People were challenged cognitively as to where their church would be located.

Their behaviour was also challenged as they saw their spiritual home move to a different location. The habit of walking to church, sitting in a particular pew, or greeting friends who shared that pew, was challenged in the move. The change of behaviour also challenged their affective response, as one woman noted:

“I walk to church, we walk past all our friends, ... we live in this community and to move out of it to go and worship, I don't like that, but there may be no choice, and some of us feel quite sad that for our local community we will not be worshipping back there, we might serve there, but it doesn't seem right not to worship there as well (AStB6).”

It was noted that the locative thread, for a number of members, seemed to relate as much to the site of the church as to the church building itself.

c. Identity work

Identity work (re-weaving the locative thread) was seen in the sense-making processes people undertook as they evaluated how the new church location was similar and different to the former. For those with a local mission focus there needed to be little adaptation as the community centres were remaining, but for those whose membership was based largely on Sunday worship attendance there was significant re-weaving to be done.

The loss of the church buildings due to earthquake damage allayed the need for an emotional and logical debate about moving from a much loved older building (which is a situation faced by many churches). In moving forward the congregations of the merged Church Alpha focussed their identity work on future possibilities rather than past attachments. One member noted;

“We need to have a modern building to attract the young people (AStA4).”

It could be said that the locative threads interweaves with the temporal thread in this sentence – where making sense of where to worship is considered in terms of future development. The logical justifications for the course of action being taken is observed as part of the identity work undertaken by members.

d. Leadership

Ministers move between churches and are generally fairly recent arrivals to a church community and may therefore have limited attachment to a church building, and the connection to the building is usually based on functionality rather than emotionality. One minister commented that the church “wasn't ever a really easy building to work in (AStA1)” and expressed no regret at its demolition.

The lightness of the locative thread in their minister may account for a lack of empathy with those who mourned the loss of the building.

One strategy of the leadership in Church Alpha sought to challenge the members sense of belonging to a place. The names of the former churches were dropped in favour of suburban titles for the buildings. One member commented that “they want us to let that name (of the church) be history. I get that, but can’t convince in here (points to head) (AStB9).” In what might have been regarded as passive resistance to the change, many members still spoke by the former names of St A and St B.

This ‘resistance to change’ was identified by several church leaders, who did not realise that it may be part of the process of church members’ sense-making in the midst of change. They saw, instead, that resistance needed to be overcome. This reflected a managerial understanding found in Lewin’s model (outlined by Ashforth in Whetten & Godfrey, 1998) where a process of change is described as unfreezing identity, changing identity and refreezing identity. In Church Alpha the management approach tried to unfreeze member attachment to a name and building, rename as suburban centres, and develop a new identity.

e. Summary

The locative threads were identified in the merger of Church Alpha in the ways that people connected their member identity with the location of the church. This was not simply in the physical building, but included the location of in the city, the suburb, and even within the church complexes (hall or church). The locative thread indicates that member identity is found in a location, a place where a person makes sense of their belonging.

6.4 Temporal Threads

The temporal threads are woven in the members’ sense of history, future prospects and the reality of the present. They were observed in the (sometimes) emotional stories that people told of their own history with the pre-merge church. This reflects a tendency for people to interpret the historical narrative contextually rather than more generally (Liu, Wilson, McLure, Higgins, 1999). Members recalled past ministers, members and events in the interviews and used these stories to explain the church’s identity. For many this included a reflection on the historically large Sunday School roll, worshipping congregation or the social functions held.

a. The pre-merge pattern of temporal threads

Each participant was asked how long they had been members of the local Church and they all gave answers that reflected their historic connection to the church. Some of the narratives involved

discussion about the churches they had belonged to in other towns or countries, and in the local church they often related their membership to the ministers who had served.

For members of St A there had been a long, stable ministry and there was also a stable core of church leadership. This ensured that the historical narrative of the church was consistent over many years – reflecting that the historical identity was CEDC. St A was noted for its authentic expression of Celtic spirituality, born in the history of the church in Scotland and Ireland. Prior to the retirement of the minister and the earthquakes, it was implied that change was not necessary. One participant wryly noted;

“You see this is not a merger because we have to, we want to. Although I think St A was at a stage where they had to do something, we didn’t have to (AStB7).”

Members of St B had encountered more changes in their ministry over the years and saw themselves as an adaptive organisation. There were several variants of this comment from a St B leader;

“We started here in the 1960’s as a church plant, when this was all new development. Lots of young families back then, new schools, new shops and new churches (AStB1).”

This particular narrative affirmed an enduring identity belief that they were a vibrant suburban church (despite the fact that those young parents of the 1960’s were now retired) and that it made them distinctive – particularly in comparison to St A.

It was interesting to note one participant’s response noting the historical connection of some members, while seemingly minimising their own;

“We’ve only been there thirty years, because a lot of them were there when the church was built, and they got married there, their children were baptised, the children were married there - that history, it’s important (AStB5).”

There is a need to acknowledge that the temporal thread is woven by the individual member’s perception of the historical narrative, not necessarily the factual detail. There is a difference between history and recollection (Goia, Corley & Farbbri, 2002) and it is the member’s recollections, positive or negative, that weaves identity.

b. Challenges to the temporal threads

In one interview with two church leaders one commented that there was a “feel of excitement (AStB1)” about the merger, and the other commented “or inevitability (ASTA2).” In this simple exchange the two women observed the emotional impact of the merger and particularly the temporal threads. The emotional response was not always negative – many people were happily

optimistic as they looked to the future, but there were also many with a saddened nostalgia for the past that they felt was lost. One of the church leaders commented;

“A number of people have been at St A Church all their lives and are going to find this a bit difficult (AStA2).”

The merger challenged the continuity of the church’s narrative and people were affected by their need to find a place within the narrative in a transition from the known story (history) to the unknown, unwritten future. This engendered excitement, dread and grief in various ways.

The merger also demanded a cognitive response to the dis-continuity that people were facing. Many members provided a somewhat rehearsed historical narrative that indicated a prior consideration of the path to the point of merger – they were making sense of where they had come from over time. A minister commented;

“St A know they’re in trouble because they’re older, much older, they’ve got no minister, the church is down (AStA1).”

This reflects the dawning reality of their situation arising in members, but also the reflection on what the church used to be (with large Sunday Schools, attendance and membership).

c. Identity work

Telling history is a process of discourse and sense-making (Brown, Colville & Pye, 2015) and is a task undertaken at both individual and a collective level. Each individual weaves their own pattern of member identity using the temporal threads, just as the church has its own history.

In the interviews each member willingly offered a narrative of their involvement with the church over many years which often revealed the other threads of member identity. Their personal history with the church involved relationships, buildings, traditions, hopes and accomplishments – each element helped to make sense of their historical membership.

At an individual level, as the merger progressed, it was the relating of that history to the current reality that helped members to make sense of their ongoing belonging in the church. The identity work on the temporal thread was seen as a weaving of the member’s historical church connection to the ongoing merged church. The primary question was seen to be, “can I be part of the ongoing story of this (merged) church?”

In Church Alpha the answers to that question fell into three groups. The first group offered an almost unconditional “yes.” They offered themselves in positions of leadership, worked on the merging process and were generally positive about the future. They made sense of the temporal thread of their member identity by writing themselves into the church’s story.

The second group could be considered a conditional “yes.” They indicated a commitment to Church Alpha if the church’s narrative followed certain paths (mission, children, worship). As they sought to weave the temporal thread – their involvement in the history of the church – the other threads, such as the purpose thread, played a conditional role.

The third group, and this was not necessarily a small group with Church Alpha, offered a limited “yes.” They were a significant number of members who had previously taken leadership roles but were now retiring and their intent was to be involved with worship and fellowship but take on no leadership role. They spoke mostly about their historical connection with the Church and, metaphorically, saw no sense in weaving their member identity into the future – but were still connected by the other threads.

A possible fourth group – those who said “no” were not identified in the interviews undertaken. These were the people who no longer participated in the church and were therefore no longer members.

The temporal threads can also be seen at the collective level as there is a process of sense-making in how the merged church came to be. Reflecting on the parish history helps make sense of the present and future in light of the past. A number of members alluded to the fact that St B had been a daughter church of St A, with a long serving member commenting “It’s going back really – and it’s new (AStB7).”

We see in this example the efforts of individuals to make sense of the collective identity in the merged church through the re-weaving of the temporal threads.

d. Leadership

Parish ministers generally have a clear commitment and history to the wider Church, but seldom have a personal history with the local church that they serve. Yet as the local minister they also inherit the legacy of previous ministries, both affirmative or negative. Some churches have a photo gallery of previous ministers and parish histories are often chaptered in alignment with various ministries.

In contrast, many of the local church leaders are long serving members with a deeply woven personal history. In Church Alpha the leaders, without exception, had themselves made sense of the merger in terms of the historical narrative of the parishes. The lay leaders celebrated the past with a connection with the present – making sense of the merger, while the ministers were more clearly focussed on the future.

Services of closure for the old church buildings celebrated the people and activities of the past, along with an acknowledgment of their legacy in the work to be done. The services clearly focussed on the end of the buildings, but an affirmation of the journey to come, and brought together the temporal and locative threads. In metaphoric terms, these services helped to weave the new narrative of the merged church with the historical narrative already woven into the members' identity.

e. Summary

The temporal thread connects members with the historical and ongoing story of the church. A merger threatens identity with discontinuity of the narrative and identity work re-weaves the member identity into the merged church, helping them to make sense of the change in terms of time.

6.5 Purpose Threads

The purpose threads are seen, in part, by the reasons why a person is a member of the church. In church language this is often described as a sense of mission. Those who work in the church realise that it is common for local churches to have a poorly articulated mission.

a. The pre-merge pattern of purpose threads

As has been noted above, St A had a strong focus on the Sunday gathering at worship. The minister at St A had recently concluded a long tenure of ministry that had a particular focus on Celtic spirituality¹⁹ and the church was well known for this expression of Christian faith throughout churches in New Zealand. When asked about the influence of this tradition a leader in St A commented;

“As far as our outlook, with [the minister] we were very much involved with the Celtic thing and that has changed, although that underlying flavour is still there. It's very much who we are, but the head's been knocked off, so to speak. So we've still got that flavour, but it's not front and centre (AStA2).”

It can be seen that Celtic spirituality is partly about how the church worships (the procedural thread) but is also about its sense of purpose in the wider community. St A had, before the merger and under the aegis of the previous minister, quietly woven an identity on being a church of Celtic

¹⁹ Celtic spirituality is a modern understanding of traditions that arose from Ireland and Scotland with a particular focus on the natural world, community and hospitality. Specific styles of prayer and music are attributed to a Celtic expression of faith.

spirituality. The retirement of the minister meant that purpose was less focussed and therefore the Celtic identity was less central and less coherent than it had been, but was clearly enduring.

Many members of St B had expressed the view that their church was mission focussed, rather than worship centred. St B had a long history of working with the community in mission activities and this was strongly advocated by the current ministry team. They provided activities for children in the school holidays, provided a foot clinic for the elderly, meals at times for those who needed both food and company, and rented out their hall to a variety of community groups. A keen participant in such activities noted;

“I see St B as an outward focussed church involving people in the community, I’m not so sure we’re that good at looking after our own people, our own spiritual needs, but I see St A as the opposite, very good at looking after its own people (AStB6).”

There was, therefore, a significant contrast between the two churches, prior to the merger, in their sense of purpose. For St A much of their purpose thread had been woven around a ministry and church building focussed on Celtic spirituality – but retirement and earthquakes had led to this being less central, enduring and coherent. For St B their purpose of community facing mission was being clearly articulated by the minister and there were plans for suitable buildings to facilitate the mission. This community mission purpose was an enduring element of their church life and made them somewhat distinctive in both the community and the wider church.

b. Challenges on the purpose thread

Prior to the merger, neither of the churches had given much thought to defining the purpose of the church – theologically it was driven by the imperative to ‘make Jesus Christ known’ but there had traditionally been little emphasis on exploring what that entails. In a merger, however, the challenge is made on the purpose thread as to what the church is about. Two central purposes that were seen to be challenged were worship and mission.

The purpose thread was often woven in association with the locative thread when worship was considered. There were a number of people who were affected by the possibility of not worshipping in a church or a locality. Some were limited by their own mobility, others wanted a worship service in their local community as a witness to their faith. But there was little drop out of attendance when services were held in a local funeral home or in a school theatre.

The behaviour of members suggests that although they were emotionally attached to the buildings, they were able to change their behaviours and attend worship in different venues. At the time of the research, there were no reports of people dropping out from Church Alpha, so it is assumed that their purpose threads remained challenged but intact.

What perhaps mitigated the affective and behavioural challenges to identity were the cognitive challenges that encouraged people to reconsider their sense of purpose through worship. This was a natural process in the wake of earthquake damage to the building, but was also encouraged by the leadership as they sought to merge the worshipping congregations. People were forced to think about the purpose of their worship and, through that process, come to understand a new sense of purpose.

A sense of purpose in the mission of the church was also challenged by the merger. There was no negative emotional reaction to the challenge of mission in the church, but there was a clear enthusiasm expressed by some. One active member from St B commented;

“We felt that by spreading the net further we could do more, that we could spread the word further as well, and do more community mission, and that’s why we’re very strong on the mission side of the merger (AStB1)”

The possibility of more people helping in the purpose of mission was a positive contributor to the sense of belonging to the merged church.

For many members in St A the mission purpose was something new. Their purpose had been particularly focussed on the celtic worship, lead by their previous minister, and not working in the community. They were therefore challenged to think about mission in a new way through preaching and newsletters.

c. Identity work

Identity work on the purpose thread can be understood in the activity of defining why people are members of the church. Two central purposes expressed by members of Church Alpha were the worship and mission components of the church.

It can be noted that the purpose does not always have to grand. One mission project run in St B was a toe clinic, where the elderly could come and have podiatric treatment. While clearly not a glamorous mission, it can be noted that stigmas from “dirty work” are responded to with a variety of affective, cognitive and behavioural responses (Kreiner, Ashforth & Sluss, 2006). Those that ran the clinics were advocates of the merger in the hope of providing a venue and personnel for the task.

Where members in Church Alpha had adopted a clear purpose, there was a greater expressed sense of identity. Serving on the council, doing a mission activity, leading children’s ministry or helping at the breakfast church all provided both a sense of purpose and a sense of belonging to the newly emerging church.

d. Leadership

At the start of the merger process the leaders of Church Alpha decided to share information about what the two churches were doing even before they merged their worship services together. The aim of this was to slowly start building a sense of shared procedures within the two church communities.

“We’ve started do our Sunday notices on the same piece of paper, so the notices are on each side and people get all the notices at their service. So everyone knows what’s going on at each other’s place (AStA1).”

This was an intuitive response, rather than a deliberate understanding of any psychological impact. The combined notice sheet allowed each church to see some of the work that was being done and reinforced the purposes that each congregation held dear.

The leaders often identified resistance to the process when members expressed some legitimate concerns about the effects of changes. The leaders saw resistance to change when some people expressed concern that worship would not be held in their local community and when facets of the church’s mission were under threat. In another example, an advocate for children’s ministry was noted to be resisting the change even though she was keenly in favour of the merger and combined worship – but wanting a space for the children to have their activity.

e. Summary

The purpose threads of member identity are considered to be woven on the ideas of why the church exists. For many members the central purpose of the church is to worship – which generally may be expanded as ‘worship in the tradition that we are used to.’ Other members are drawn to mission purposes, often in a variety of forms, but all serving those beyond the membership of the church. When the Church and member are in agreement about meaningful purpose, there is a growing sense of identity.

6.6 Procedural Threads

The procedural threads are identified in how members act as, and within, the collective group. This suggests that people identify with an organisation and its’ members, in part, because of doing the same things.

a. The pre-merge pattern of procedural threads

Both St A and St B were Presbyterian churches, but that did not mean that all of their procedures were similar. At a governance level St A was led by a traditional committee named the Session

consisting of elders, ordained for life. In St A this was a sizeable number of people, and on average much older than in St B. St B was led by a Parish Council that had a smaller number of elected members that often changed. A minister who worked with both churches noted;

“St B was like driving a mini and you could just change direction and go wherever you were going, whereas St A was like a Kenworth with a trailer (AStA1)”

In St A the Session reflected a strong Presbyterian tradition in its procedures and worship. Being Presbyterian was central to their decision-making and in their Sunday services, and they understood that it made them distinctive from their neighbouring Anglican or Baptist churches – and even from St B. It also brought a coherency to their governance, theology and worship as they reflected on their traditional Reformed heritage. An older member commented on the change that she saw;

“So to have somebody come to our services in sneakers and a rough open necked shirt and take the service was a big shock. After (the former minister) with his suit and tie and robes and collar and everything, wow! (AStA3)”

St B held a looser grip on their Presbyterian heritage, but still had a strong view of their governance procedures. They valued a more liberal governance structure that derived from the establishment of the church in the suburbs in the 1960's by young families. Despite that, a leader described surprise at finding subtle resistance to changes that the merger brought;

“It's an unusual reaction that's shocked a lot of us, actually, we thought they're so easy, they're so adaptable that they'll come across on this new thing easily and, they will, but it's more uncomfortable than we thought it might have been (AStA1).”

There was also a greater openness to variance in worship services in St B, attributed by some to the variety of minister's and the frequent changes in ministry. An openness to change was, in some ways, a CEDC component of their procedural thread.

b. Challenges of the merger

It is fairly obvious to note that when two organisations are brought together there needs to be a rationalisation of procedures. Two churches, even though they are both Presbyterian, do many things differently. These differences are both large and small, and at any size have potential to unravel member identity.

One major point of contention at the early stage of the merger was whether the church would be governed by a Session and Board of Managers, or by a unified Parish Council. A retired parish councillor from St B commented;

“That's something we've got to get sorted. We're not going to revert to Session and Board of Managers (AStB2).”

That much of the leadership for the merger came from St B meant that there was a general assumption that their Parish Council format would be the choice, but this raised concerns from some in St A, with one member noting;

“But if they do away with the elders, who is going to do the pastoral care? (AStA4)”

Her concern, echoed by others, was that some of the procedures (especially in pastoral care and worship) would be lost in the merger. In Church Alpha the members of both churches had already experienced some of this when they were forced from their church buildings due to the earthquake.

In a number of the interviews members expressed an emotional uncertainty that had developed about how the new church might do things. At the first combined service held in the school theatre, a woman who was serving morning tea commented that she had arrived 90 minutes early because she wanted to make sure that everything was done properly. A Sunday School teacher expressed her anxiety at working with the children in unfamiliar rooms.

The procedural thread is clearly related to behaviour and the merger (and earthquakes) forced people to change their traditional behaviours. It was interesting to note that after the earthquake the St B congregation met in their hall, in seats that were placed in a circle. A leader noted that when they then combined for a service in the funeral chapel “people had gotten used to worshipping in a circle, so the funeral chapel (with pews) was not so suitable (AStB8).” This indicated that the procedural thread can be re-woven and people can, relatively quickly, use it to weave their identity.

A change in procedures also necessitated a cognitive response and challenged both members and leaders to think carefully about how things were done.

c. Identity work

Identity work undertaken in weaving with the procedural thread requires a behavioural response more than the other threads do. The identity work seeks to make sense of how things are now to be done in the merged church.

After the earthquake St B held their worship in the church hall, necessitating a Sunday morning transformation into a sacred space. This meant working around a breakfast group that met earlier in the morning. One of the volunteers who set up the chairs commented about his interaction with the breakfast group;

“We don’t get a chance to talk to these people because we’ve got to set it up for the church, instead of sitting around the table (AStB4)”

There emerged from the conversation a conflict between the need to enhance the new procedures of the congregation and a desire to make connections with those who attended the breakfast group. These same tensions were described by the Sunday School leader who addressed the challenges of maintaining her programme both in the hall complex and at the temporary funeral home venue. The new procedures were a sign of change, but also a way that the individual could rationalise that change in terms of the other threads of identity.

This was noticeable when the first combined service at the school was held and people came into a new venue and had to define new procedures for doing familiar tasks. There was active discussion about where to hand out name-tags, negotiations in the kitchen about how to serve the morning tea, and silent consideration about where to sit in the tiered auditorium. In the negotiation of how to do things together, people came to find a new way which was adopted as ‘our’ way to do things.

d. Leadership

Many of the Church Alpha leaders held a cognitive dissonance about whether the church members were adapting to or resisting change. They would speak of how well people were accepting the process of merging, but then reflect on the complaints or negativity. It seems essential in analysing this to note that the decision makers have made their decision after a process of discernment and knowing that it makes sense. Those who are not decision makers are required to make sense of the changes through their experience.

In Church Alpha there was a noted commitment to take the merger slowly and to discuss and debate many issues. A minister commented on the process;

“It’s hard to get them in synch, with their speed of acceptance. It’s a constant, constant thing you’ve got to work around the knitting together, how is this going to help this new thing, how do we set the culture so they’re open to this new thing. It’s exhausting (AStA1).”

The conversation highlighted that there needed to be more than a cognitive or emotional acceptance of the merger, but a behavioural change. Culture is often regarded as an outward expression of identity and how we do things (the procedural thread) often defines how we actualise our culture and identity. The leadership in Church Alpha seemed to understand, intuitively, that explanations for new ways for doing things was important for people to make sense of the changes that they were facing.

e. Summary

The procedural threads are woven by how the member does things in the church. There is a particular focus on how people behave, but it also impacts their thoughts and emotions. A new procedure makes a member feel like a visitor, even in a familiar setting, but when the procedures make sense for the member and church, a new sense of member identity is woven.

6.7 Valuative Threads

The valuative threads are woven by the value which belonging to the church community has for the individual church member. The valuative threads share a commonality with concepts of social capital where there is an essence of worth attributed to social connectedness. Churches are volunteer organisations and membership is not rewarded with any sort of monetary compensation, so assessing the value of membership is a subjective task.

a. The pre-merge pattern of valuative threads

The participants from St A had been members of the church for many years, at St A or in other towns before moving into the area. They invested their time and effort primarily in the worship service on Sunday morning, on church social/pastoral events, or in governance. They received in return regular Sunday worship, ministerial pastoral care, and a witness of their faith to the community.

Attendance at the Sunday service and giving a freewill offering was central to their understanding of membership, and this had been an enduring task over many years. Members gave time and money to the Church and perceived both personal reward through spiritual and pastoral care, and a sense of participating in the wider mission of the Church. The elders were also long serving and devoted in their commitment, although a number retired due to the assessment of their current capabilities.

In the St B members there was a clearer commitment to mission in the community that stood alongside worship and pastoral care. An active retiree noted;

“I’m pretty much working in the church now – I’m in the office on Friday, I’ve got the foot clinic on Thursday, I’m pretty busy at the church without my own things (AStB4).”

But the commitment to such work was conditional on the church continuing in mission. When the participant was asked if they would be members if there was no mission, the reply was “no.” It was clear that there was a value placed on their mission service and this was linked to their membership and sense of belonging.

Members from St B offered their time and effort in activities such as the foot clinic, children's programmes and serving breakfast – tasks that have little tangible reward. This could be considered a form of 'dirty' work (Kreiner, Ashforth & Sluss, 2006), but inherent in the concept of 'dirty work' is an idea that there is a perceived value in both the work and the identity imbued by it. Members described a sense of worth in serving the church in this way – which is both a psychological and theological response.

b. Challenges on the valuative thread by the merger

One of the church leaders from St A, when commenting on the merger, noted that

“it's become a lot more obvious, it's the practical thing to do and the right thing to do (AStA2).”

This cognitive response to the merger can be understood, in part, as an assessment that the merger is worthwhile doing. This comment reflects an understanding of the Church at an organisational level, but of interest is the individual challenge to member identity. The challenge is therefore about whether the merger provides value for the member's ongoing involvement.

Several members proposed a valuative assessment of their membership. One man noted that he would only be part of the church if they maintained their community facing ministry, a woman indicated that she would only be in a church that had a children's ministry, and others suggested that they would attend while their friends also came. These responses indicate different measures for assessing the value of membership in the church.

The valuative thread was also challenged by the emotions aroused by the merger, with several people implying a form of delayed gratification – that certain aspects of the merger have been emotionally demanding but will be worth it in the end. In the Church Alpha interviews, early in the merging process, there was no member who indicated that they felt the effort of merging was not worthwhile.

c. Identity work

Church members who take on roles in the merger can be seen to act both as “insiders” (managers or employees) and as “outsiders” (consumers or members) (Hutch & Shultz, 1997). It was clear that those members who had invested themselves (their time and effort) into aspects of the merging process had a stronger sense of belonging to the church. A member from St B, heavily involved in the community mission work and on a combined committee, noted;

“I think the people who were confused about the merger or the joining of the churches or whatever you want to call it, they were the people that didn’t really say too much in the meetings (AStB4).”

He noted that if people engaged in the process of the merger, they came to understand more about why it should happen. This can be explained as the identity work being undertaken on the threads of identity and the value that the identity work offers.

d. Leadership

The leadership of Church Alpha was clear in their understanding that the church exists not simply to have a Sunday morning church service, but to be a witness to the community. One aim of the merger was expressed by a lay leader when she said that “we’re hoping that with merging the two the volunteer pool is bigger (AStB1).” The hope was not simply to have more people to do the volunteer tasks, but that those who volunteered would have a greater sense of involvement in the work of the church (and therefore a stronger member identity).

In talking about the proposed name for the merged Church Alpha minister commented

“You want something that people can grasp easy enough and have some ownership of (AStA1).”

The metaphoric ownership of the name, or the church itself, is woven in the valuative threads. The process of choosing the name and other key decisions also affirmed the value of each member in the merger. A lay leader from St A commented;

“There’s been reports back once a month from the vision and strategy group and the session to say this is what we’re thinking. Before the vote in September a paper was sent out to everybody (AStA2).”

This gave voice (and value) to members as individuals and affirmed their place within the church organisation. This reflects the issues of power that can be addressed in the process of sense-making (Brown, Colville & Pye, 2015).

It should also be noted that the leadership was very clear in rewarding the efforts that people had made to the former churches and in the merging process. The acknowledgment of people is a subtle acknowledgment that their efforts have made a difference and weaves their member identity just a little more clearly.

e. Summary

The valuative threads are woven by a member's sense of worth in their membership. When a member invests themselves into the merger there is a strengthening of identity, in part because they have offered something of themselves to the Church and in part because the church has offered part ownership to the member.

6.8 Chapter Summary

The study of Church Alpha was undertaken at an early stage in the merging process which enabled a focus on the challenges to identity that the merger had and the response to those challenges. The six threads provide areas of church life which are impacted by the merging process and encourage the consideration of member identity in terms across a spectrum of church life.

Relational threads were seen to be challenged by the coming together of the two groups and the real and perceived threats to old friendships. Strategies were put in place by the church to build new relationships, although these did not always work out effectively. Identity work on the relational threads helped to answer the questions about who the other members of the church were.

Locational threads were challenged in Church Alpha before the merger by the earthquake, but discussion on worship and mission venues ensured that the threads remained challenged during the merger. People sought to understand where they would be members of the church, either at worship or in mission activity.

Temporal threads were threatened by the perceived break in history but felt more intensely by those in St B who lost their minister through retirement. Identity work was undertaken in the telling and retelling of a story that connected the past, present and future together with their membership at the centre.

Purpose threads were a largely invisible element of the two churches' identities before the merger and their importance was highlighted by the merger process. People began to talk about the purpose of the church (buildings, activities and people) and this invited participation in the purpose and a sense of why a person was a member of the church.

Procedural threads were found in how things were done differently in the two churches and identity work was involved in finding new ways. That new way may have reflected one church's practice, be an adaptation, or an innovative response, but when it became 'our way' of doing things it helped to build a sense of member identity.

Valuative threads remained connected in Church Alpha as members continued their commitment to the church, despite the challenges of the merger. At the time of the study no-one had been identified as leaving the church due to the upheaval of the merger.

The interweaving of the threads has only been lightly touched on in the preceding analysis. Each of the core threads are impacted by the other content of member identity found in the other threads. The locative threads, for example, are strengthened or weakened by the relationships encountered at a particular venue, the procedures followed or the value of the gathering held. The interweaving is understood in the context and timing of the identity challenges being faced.

7 Church Beta Analysis

This chapter presents the analysis of the data collected from Church Beta, a merger of four Presbyterian churches, St C, St D, St E and St F²⁰. The church under study had formally merged four years before the study began, but people understood that they were still in the process of merging. This study allowed the opportunity to explore the ongoing impact on the emerging member identity.

7.1 Introduction

The primary focus of this chapter is on the identity work being undertaken in Church Beta as they progressed their church merger. This explores the process of sense-making within the context of the merged church and how church members worked to reweave their threads of identity.

In Church Beta it can be noted that a number of people had given up on the task of identity work – they had ceased belonging and no longer had a member identity. In 2012 the four churches had 525 members and an average June attendance at worship of 242. From 2013-2015 the membership of the merged church was, respectively, 417, 375 and 346. Worship attendance was recorded at 172, 150, 114 over the same three years²¹. This equates to a loss of 1/3 of members and just over half of the worship attendance.

It was only possible to recruit one former member in this study due to privacy and access issues with those who no longer belonged to the church. It was reported that some attended other churches, while others watched services on the television. It could be said here that their church membership ceased, but their Christian faith was still present in their lives.

A secondary focus of this chapter is on the church leadership and change management strategies – from interviews, literature and sermons. Such management was not implemented as a coercive tool, but from an honest desire to improve the lives of the church and its membership.

²⁰ Church Beta, St C, D, E, & F are pseudonyms. Participants are labelled BStC#, BStD#, BStE# or BStSF# reflecting their church of origin

²¹ Statistics were accessed on the PCANZ website (PCANZ.org.nz).

7.2 Relational Threads

a. Working on relationships

Members of Church Beta also used the family metaphor to speak of the church, as members of Church Alpha had done, but in doing so reflected that after five years the family had yet to blend together. One commented of their pre-merge church (St D) "...it was a church family where they knew everybody (BStD2)." His reflection was in a simple form – an older woman commented of St C;

"It was home, very much a family church. We all knew each other very well. Got along very well with each other, too. (*no disagreements?*) Well, I wouldn't say that (BStC4)."

In this comment the metaphor is expanded with the idea that families are complex social units and that, even in conflict, families stick together. The metaphor was again invoked when a woman leader commented that the merging process was "like a new blended family unit (BStC3)." She remarked how it was necessary to get to know people as part of the merging process.

To feel part of a church family was a previous experience and many members used that sense of family as a measuring rod of success. For many, the merged church was failing to generate that feeling of being family that had been their previous experience. Several people used the word 'familiar' in their descriptions of the church – reflecting the underlying family metaphor that highlights a common unity in the church.

In his assessment, one of the former elders, who had taken on many responsibilities for the property at St C, commented;

"In a way there is some coming together into one group but it certainly not there yet. There are still three APW²² groups that function and they function at different times, might even be four. There are two different Sunday lunch groups - the St C one has absorbed some of the St F people, that predates the full merger, but there's still the St D one which operates separately. In fact we turned up at the ... Golf Club one day for lunch and there was St D group as well - we sat in our patch and they in theirs. That's crazy, it doesn't help (BStC2)."

Familiarisation is an activity that brings people into the family, and for most church members that implied a unity of action and meeting. In each of the pre-merge churches there were a set of name-tags that sought to ensure a familiarity – even though the congregations seldom had many visitors. The name tags were a symbol of each church family and a person from St E noted;

"Before, we used to have our own separate system. St C had a box, St D put them on a table and we had a big board. When we had combined serviced we'd each get out name tag and we knew where people had come from (BStE4)."

²² Association of Presbyterian Women

This brings together several threads – temporal, locational, procedural and relational. At a combined service it allowed people to know where each had come from (in time and space), it highlighted different procedures, and it identified each church family. For a time it made sense to use the old system and identity – but sense-making in the merger led to a new system. It was in the midst of the interview process for this research that a common name tag (and distribution system) was introduced and at a service people commented that it was symbol of being united.

After four years of a merger process two points were clear – many of the relational threads of the former church identities were still tightly woven and new relational threads were slowly being woven.

b. Managing relational change

The church leadership were well aware of the need to develop familial relationships within the merged church. One central theme that emerged in preaching and discussion derived from a Maori proverb;

He aha te mea nui o te ao

What is the most important thing in the world?

He tangata, he tangata, he tangata

It is the people, it is the people, it is the people.²³

This was used to promote the idea that buildings, procedures and finances were far less important than developing relationships between people. One leader commented that “many see it [the loss of the church building] like a death in the family, but you have to move on (BStD2).” In terms of the threads metaphor, there was a strong emphasis on the relational thread. This emphasis led to a confession, of sorts, from one woman who noted;

“We really shouldn't think of the church as a building. But we do, a lot of us do. I'm trying not to cos the modern thing is that we can worship anywhere (BStC1).”

The pre-dominant strategy in Church Beta was to encourage the members of the pre-merged churches to get to know one another and develop relationships. When these efforts seemed to fail the accusation generally was that people were resisting change. When people gathered in worship and sat in defined areas of the church it was considered that they were resisting new relationships (rather than affirming old connections).

²³ Original source unknown.

c. Summary

It became clear in Church Beta that the leadership had a focus on building the pastoral relationships with an intent to re-build a sense of family. From experience, this is a typical response in many mergers – a strategy that includes meals, team-building exercises, get-to-know-you activities and name tags. The importance of re-weaving the relational thread of member identity is not to be minimised, but the research highlights that the other threads must also be considered in the development of member identity.

Metaphorically, this suggests that there needs to be more than a development of friendship. Member identity is woven not just in relationships, but with the other five threads. On the positive side, member relationships were strengthened by those who shared a common place, a similar story, a mutual goal, a joint process and a shared benefit. This was most often reflected in the relationships developed through working committees. On the negative side, the weaving of the relational thread in Church Beta was hindered by the inconsistency of the buildings used, the loss of history, the unfocussed mission purpose, the variety of procedures and the diminished sense of value.

7.3 Locative Threads

a. Working on location

At the time of the research two of the former churches (St E and St D) had been sold and members gathered in worship at either St C or St F on a Sunday morning. There was a decision to use locational names for the churches rather than their traditional names, so St C came to be known as V Road and St F as W Road. One member noted

“I try not to call it St C, I try to call it V Road, so it is distinct. I carefully try not to call it my church - you know, old St C stuff comes in. I do try to not do that ... but in some ways we have to keep the identity of that name because that's what past people know it as (BStC3).”

The leader, who had promoted the name change, admitted that this strategy has not worked “terribly well (BStD3).” The intent was to affirm the newness of the merged church and put aside the separate traditions, but as she reflected on the process there was an acknowledgement that people saw this as a challenge and some either “make mistakes and refer to” the old name or are part of “a rearguard action ... to try and reclaim the name (BStD3).” The assessment by leaders that this was resistance belied the cognitive and affective processing that members were attempting. One member commented;

“We've been calling them W Road for instance, and now we seem to be mixing things up and some can't get their heads around it, by doing it they are dropping all of the heritage, all of the years that have gone by and the people that have done great things, all that has been lost because the name has been dropped (BStD2).”

These comments highlight both the identity work that is being undertaken by members and the interweaving of the locative threads with the others. A church is not just a location that can be re-labelled, but a place where relationships, purposes and history have been woven.

As mentioned above in the discussion on the relational thread, members were observed at worship in V Road to sit in specific pews with others from their former churches. This was noted as being about friends keeping together (and excluding outsiders) but it may also reflect identity work on the locative thread as people strive to create their own space within a strange church. It has similarities to students in block courses who sit in the same seats and may get upset if someone steals “their” seat. This suggests that weaving member identity requires a place where a person can belong.

b. Managing locative change

The church leaders were aware of the attachment that members had to the buildings and emphasised that the church is the people, not the building. There was also a careful plan to celebrate the two buildings that were sold, with services and memories shared. One former member of St C noted that they never really had the opportunity to celebrate their past as the combined services came into their facilities. The intent at the time the research began was to build a single new facility for the merged church but this was not approved by the church authorities. There seemed to be little strategy by the church leadership to make changes at V Road that emphasised a new stage of the church’s journey – a neutral building project may have created a greater sense of our place.

At a different level of identity, Church Beta took on a geographic name based on the local town. This was reported to be an interim measure while a new name was discussed, but it quickly became familiar. This reflects, perhaps, the fact that the name was able to encompass the location of the merged church’s identity and that the members could therefore identify with it. While the old church names lingered and were, at times, considered unhelpful to identity work, the merged name described well the location of the church and helped members to affirm that they were all part of the same location.

c. Summary

It is well known that members and communities identify with church buildings in their community. The earthquake damaged Christchurch cathedral is a good example. In a church merger the

members must break their attachments to the old building (or accept that they now share it with others) and re-weave a sense of belonging to a new place.

In Church Beta it was an expressed hope that a single new building might be erected for the church and this may have developed a sense of belonging to the building – but the declining numbers limited the opportunity for such a rebuilding. The re-weaving of the locative thread may have been hindered by the rotation of churches early in the merger and the challenges faced in planning a new building. This meant that, metaphorically, there was no place for the other threads to be woven into member identity.

7.4 Temporal Threads

a. Working with history

St C and St D had early origins in the town, although the former had moved from the city centre to the southern suburbs. St E was a development of the St D congregation and, in turn, St F was an offshoot of St D. People spoke of St C and St D being sister churches, of St E as the daughter church (of St D) and St F the granddaughter.

These epithets captured not only the history, but some sense of the perceived culture. St D and St C were considered traditional, St E as more liberal, but mature, and St F as a younger congregation with innovative ideas. That view of history seemed to colour how people considered the merged church – especially the two Sunday services. The service at V Road was regarded as traditional and the service at W Road as contemporary. This division reinforced the historical narrative and ensured a division of identity between the two worshipping congregations.

Identity work seemed to be helped by the re-telling of the common history of the church in the town and provided a cognitive and affective means for keeping a continuity with the past. An elder who had been part of both St D and St C noted;

“When I was looking at the history the first parish was called the {local town name} parish or something ... it's not a very exciting name, but it's a very safe name (BStC3).”

Members were re-weaving their identity by evoking the past to look to the future. What was not caught in this research was the voice of those who saw their own story of involvement with the church ending with the sale of the building or the cessation of worship services.

The process of sense-making in the temporal thread was an ongoing one. It can be said that it takes time to make history – people needed to experience life as a merged church before they could start to have a sense of belonging in the story of the church.

b. Managing temporal change

One recurring theme in the change management in Church Beta was a reference to the biblical story of the exodus, where Moses takes the people on a 40 year journey wandering in the wilderness before entering the promised land. This was presented in sermons and written material. There were two key emphases from the church leaders – that we need to leave Egypt (the past) behind us and focus on the promised land (the future) ahead of us. One minister commented about the decision-making processes of the merger;

“It's the Exodus thing, why did you bring us out into the wilderness to die. Why didn't you leave us in Egypt, but they forget they were slaves and it was a pretty crappy life (BStF2).”

The subtle implication of this strategy implied that the history of the churches prior to the merger was negative. The research participant who had left the church commented that the leadership “don't care about the small towns and our history (BStD1).” His response suggests that the leadership had failed to affirm his sense of the church's history.

Other participants spoke of the future as something to either be afraid of (BStC1) or optimistic for (BStE1, BStD2). The church leadership developed a Mission Action Plan (acronym: the MAP) as a key document for the merger, providing the metaphoric path through the wilderness. They lived out the metaphor (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980/2003) by highlighting the negativity of the past and the positive future that lay ahead.

The challenge, however, was that many people adopted the Exodus metaphor and identified themselves as being in the wilderness, full of uncertainty and indirection. In an informal conversation at morning tea, one member commented that it may be a generation before the merged church enters the promised land.

c. Summary

The temporal thread highlights the inherent conflict between continuity and change. Identity work on the temporal thread is seen in the weaving of how the member has been a part of the historical narrative and how they might continue, and be part of, the story into the future.

An effort was put into celebrating the closure of a couple of church buildings, but the ending of the two church communities whose buildings remained (St C and St F) were largely neglected. This reflected a process that highlighted the necessary change for the merged church and ignored the

need for continuity. There was significant continuity on the other threads of identity and these were not affirmed.

It was also noted that two services of worship were held on most Sunday mornings, labelled a traditional service (St C) and a contemporary service (St F). This subtly reinforced the impression that the St C congregation were at an end of a journey and had a lesser value as members than the younger ones. It was not surprising to find that they complained at lack of traditional hymns being sung in the service when led by a younger minister.

7.5 Purpose Threads

a. Working with purpose

Four years after the merger, for those not involved in the leadership of Church Beta there was difficulty in defining a purpose of the church – in the past or present. One long term St E member, who had extensive involvement with children’s work, commented;

“I don’t know, I wonder if there was a purpose. Really just to keep doing things the way they were (BStE3).”

This reflected that for many members their involvement with the church was primarily through the Sunday morning worship service and this was, therefore, the major purpose of the church. Another long-term leader of St E noted;

“We’re doing what we’ve done for years, we’ve been loyal and they’ve been very good at telling us we have to be ... we don’t measure our success by numbers, as long as we’re being true to the Gospel (BStE2).”

This is not an unfamiliar sentiment in some church circles and is based on the premise of disciples being faithful and allowing God’s spirit to come upon people outside the church. With this comes a rejection of evangelism, invitations, and promotions – in favour of maintaining a church that people might come to. The purpose of the church was filtered down to a simple one of existence which was fundamentally challenged by the need to merge with others.

It could be suggested that the worship purpose was highlighted by the development of services labelled ‘traditional’ and ‘contemporary’ which implies that worship should meet the needs of those who attend and the traditional service was not reaching out to the community. Many of those who attended the traditional service saw its existence as a purpose, but could not weave a sense of membership to any wider purpose expressed by Church Beta.

The Mission Action Plan was a promotion of a purpose beyond Sunday worship and had arisen out of discussion groups over several years. These groups had studied The Purpose Driven Church (Warren, 1995) and this informed the development of the M.A.P. It was interesting to note that those involved in the discussions had a clearer grasp of mission and a stronger identity with the merged parish. This suggests that they were able to weave their sense of purpose with the emerging purposes of the church.

b. Managing changes in purpose

Ministers and church leaders are acutely aware that worship is not the sole purpose of a church and often seek to motivate their congregations to a greater sense of purpose. One minister from Church Beta highlighted what was encountered;

“They were very good and went through Rick Warren's Purpose Driven Church to try and rework how they thought about church. So they began to understand that the church's purpose was those five things²⁴ and when we put people through to ask what sort of people we have here, we've got lots of administrators, we don't have anyone, and I mean that quite seriously, that's passion is evangelism, whose passion is mission. We just don't have those people and so when we try to organise the church in terms of those five groups, they weren't balanced (BStF2).”

Using the weaving metaphor, it could be suggested that the effort of the church leaders was seeking to weave purpose from disconnected threads. Many people did not understand a missional or evangelical purpose for the church and therefore struggled to weave their member identity into the church's purpose for mission. The same minister noted of the leadership;

“We always talked about merging to do mission, we were very up front that this was not being done to just hold on to what they had. This was coming together to do mission differently. Now people heard that in very different ways, (mission) as far as St E people were concerned mission, was just doing what they were doing because they were already active in the community, but the fault in the perception was that it was never God's mission, it was theirs.(BStF2)

The church leadership focussed many of their efforts on developing a mission purpose, but this neglected the unstated purposes, great or small, of many members. Keeping the historic building, running a youth group, having a choir, or providing pastoral care to the elderly are all specific purposes that some members wove their identity with.

²⁴ The five areas of purpose defined by Warren (1995) are fellowship, discipleship, worship, ministry and evangelism.

c. Summary

The purpose threads are understood to be woven when the individual and organisation share common objectives. There is an interplay between why a person belongs to the church and why the church itself exists. The research suggests that the match does not have to be perfect, but there is a point when a person will not identify as a member of a church that does not share any common purpose.

Church Beta sought to develop a clearer sense of vision or purpose for the merged church through studies, sermons and literature. These efforts can be understood as the church seeking to weave the collective purpose with the members, rather than having the members weave their own sense of purpose. It could be suggested that many saw the purpose of the church simply in terms of the Sunday service (and for some that also meant in a particular building). The lack of collective purpose was, in a way, foreshadowed by the use of the Exodus story.

7.6 Procedural Threads

a. Working with new ways

When asked how the church had been organised a minister noted

“As for the St F folk, they are what I would call a rostered community, they came and did their jobs, and thought that church was a good idea and wanted to be involved (BStF2).”

Rosters are a fairly normal practice in churches across the world – flower rosters, tea rosters, Bible reading, prayers of intercession, offering collection, sound control. People offer themselves to do a task and share that task with others at rostered times. While some churches have a description of the duties, many people have been on the roster for years and know what to do without instructions.

In an informal conversation following a church service, a former member of St C commented about how the church door had been left unlocked for a week. She explained that they had been caught out by the assumption of knowledge – in St D the organist was the person who locked the church following the service as they had a choir practice before leaving, but in St C the duty elder was designated to be the last to leave and lock the church. When the roster placed a St D person on duty they did not realise that they needed to lock the door.

There were no major consequences of the door being unlocked, but the person who was on duty felt responsible and removed her name from the roster. It was noted in the conversation that you can't assume how things are done and people needed to talk about some of the smaller details. It was

clear that discussion of the church merger at a macro level was important, but some of the issues at a micro level had an impact on how members were able to reweave their threads of identity.

One example was offered in what was described as the kitchen wars. This happened when two of the churches merged and a winter lunch was being held. This brought women from both churches into a common kitchen. A minister noted;

“There was lot of uncertainty when these two merged because people weren't sure who would do what, and how to work in the little kitchen. They had to negotiate two groups of people, two kitchens and two different ways of doing things (BStF2).”

There was no simple solution to many of the procedural thread entanglements. It clearly took time for people to adjust to new ways of doing things and to feel that this was their way – to build a member identity with the new procedures.

b. Managing procedural change

While addressing the question of where conflict had arisen in the merger process, a minister noted that the discussions had largely been on the major issues (buildings, finances, ministry) but it was the everyday detail that impacted members. For her a central element of the process was the development of trust so that the smaller details could be worked out over time.

It is interesting to note that the conduct of the worship services on a Sunday were not discussed in terms of the previous church traditions, but far more specifically with the ministers who led the services. Any appreciation or concern about changes in the way that the Sunday service was held was attributed to the ministry rather than a traditional format from a previous church.

Reflecting on a period when shared services rotated through three church buildings, a minister noted:

“A St D person told me when we were going to a shared service, she said, we are going to support you but how can we when you are going away. I thought we were going together, and I thought me taking the service would assure her that we were in the journey together, but she obviously thought that St D was ending and that the location was more important than the minister (BStD3).”

This suggests that in Presbyterian churches the impact of a traditional liturgy is modified by the individual differences of the worship leader. It would be interesting to explore this element in a more liturgically structured church setting, such as an Anglican or Roman Catholic church.

b. Summary

Every group of people develop their own procedures to accomplish the tasks before them and a merger necessitates the development of a process that will work for the new group. Uncertainty about how things are done may inhibit identity work and disrupt progress on the merger. Clearly expressing procedures and the reason for changes may help members to identify that this is their process moving into the future.

Church Beta experienced the affective and cognitive challenge of bringing together two different ways of doing things. These clashes were generally not at a collective level, but at an interpersonal level as members did practical tasks, such as cleaning, catering or locking churches. The leadership adapted by ensuring that more information was written and there were conversations about how things were done. This meant that individuals were able to develop a sense of belonging in the way that the merged church did things.

7.7 Valuative Threads

a. Working on value

A volunteer youth worker, who had only recently joined the church, was working with young people and commented on the buildings;

“They’ve already got the money from selling the old churches. They weren’t worth keeping (BSt-1).”

She valued the buildings as a low priority and rejoiced that the money might be used to build a modern facility or be spent on mission. The valuation of the buildings reflected her own situation, where working with young people was valuable. Her valuation stands in stark contrast to the older man who placed all his value with the church that was sold – and left the church as a consequence.

An interesting comment was made by one member as she talked about being asked to take on a door duty role:

“I only began to feel part of [the church] when I was put on the door roster and was welcoming people to ‘my’ church, which it hadn’t been till then (BStE4).”

This confirms the observation that those who took on tasks with the merged church were more likely to have woven a stronger sense of belonging. This seems to be interwoven with the other threads – when people work together they develop stronger relationships, when people do work on a property they identify more with that property, and when people share a common purpose there is a mutual affirmation of their passion.

b. Managing valuative change

One issue, described by a minister, arose when the merged church tried to integrate the roughly 70 elders who had served on four governing councils into a leadership team of 10 elders. The minister expressed her surprise that more did not take the opportunity to serve on various sub-committees and workgroups, noting

“People were hurt and anxious at the time and so you weren't quite sure whether it was a straight retirement, a bit of rebellion or just a lack of interest (BStD3).”

Her expectation, and that of other church leaders, was that people would maintain their same level of commitment into the merged church as they did in the former churches. For many the merger provided the opportunity to retire. The minister noted

“A lot of people took the opportunity to come off and retire and it was most noticeable with the choirs (BStD3).”

One elder commented that there was “a general tiredness across (BStC2)” the leadership of St C and another said “poor old ... is still charging around St C because he knows the ropes – and that works. (BStE3).” These comments reflect that they saw retirement as a sign of tiredness rather than resistance to change (as the minister had suggested).

A key strategy of the leadership in Church Beta was to get people involved in the decision-making processes and this added a sense of value to their membership. This is highlighted by a comment made by a minister, noting that when the church council came to be re-elected, “it felt like we had to go back and start all over again, because these new people came on board and they were very much thinking I'm here representing (BStF1).” Those who served on the church council had a stronger sense of what the church was about and why they were members of it.

c. Summary

The valuative thread is woven between giving and receiving of social capital. Member identity is woven when a person works for the good of the church and is rewarded in some way for that effort. The more opportunities a member had to serve the merged church, it seemed that the stronger their identity was with the church.

7.8 Chapter Summary

The Church Beta case study was conducted several years after the formal merger of the churches and this provided an opportunity to explore how identity work continued to be undertaken as members sought to reweave their sense of identity and belonging to the new church. The threads

metaphor provided a useful framework for considering what was happening in the emotional, cognitive and behavioural responses to the merger.

It is an obvious statement to declare that relationships take time to develop and it is clear that the relational thread of identity takes time to weave. The member begins to feel that they are part of the new group. The research indicates that the relational thread is enhanced by being woven with the other threads of identity, but there are severe limits when other factors impact on the ability to identify with a new group. Ongoing prayer groups, lunch meetings and social activities impacted the re-weaving of member identity into the new church.

Property is a large expense and decisions need to be carefully made, but identity struggles to be woven in a locative void. The unsettled journey of where the church exists for Church Beta hindered the weaving of member identity through locative threads. A rotational worship venue was detrimental to the development of a new collective identity that people felt they could be members of.

An effective membership story connects both the past and the future and invites the members to an ongoing participation. In Church Beta many things came to an end that members were unable to reconnect with in the new church formation. Many saw the journey coming to an end in the wilderness rather than accepting the invitation to cross into an unknown promised land.

This research highlighted that many churches have considered their sense of purpose as a church and therefore the membership is unsure why they are members of that particular church. The merger draws attention to a need for a clearly stated purpose, along with a map and timeline to attain the purpose.

How things are done in a church can be somewhat subjective even in an established church, but a merger highlights differences between former groups. There is a subtle trade-off between the comfort of a known procedure and the development of a new mutual procedure. Developing new ways of doing things can enhance a members' sense of belonging.

The value of membership is assessed across a broad set of scales, but the underlying question is whether membership is "worth it." If the cost of change becomes too much for some members then they will cease to belong, and that cost is distributed across the threads of identity.

8 Discussion

This research suggests that, metaphorically, church member identity is woven from various threads and that a merger of churches challenges member identity across those threads and demands that members work to re-weave their identity or live with a diminished sense of identity that has negative implications for both individual and church.

This chapter reflects on the thesis with specific regard to church mergers, then to identity in churches in general. A third section explores how this concept of member identity may be evident in other organisations and the next section reflects on member identity in the field of organisational psychology. The final section considers the practical value of using the 'threads of identity' framework as a heuristic for understanding and managing planned change within organisations.

8.1 A church merger's challenge on identity

Member identity can be understood to be dependent on context, timing and content as people seek to make sense of their membership of a church. The context is specific to the church and the member, and changes for either the organisation or individual impacts how member identity is woven. The timing suggests that identity is fluid and influenced by the passage of time and is not a fixed attribute. The content is regarded as a sense of belonging expressed across the six identified threads of member identity.

A church merger draws attention to member identity because it disrupts the context, timing and content of a member's belonging to a group of people called the church. Across the six threads the member faces affective, behavioural and cognitive challenges as they ask how their membership is impacted by the merger.

The group dynamics of a church, at various levels, are unsettled by a merger. Not only is the membership of the church itself contested, but so too is membership of the various groups within the church (*e.g.* leadership, choir, social). The member must re-weave a variety of relational threads to affirm their belonging to the wider church setting – it is not just to be a member of the church, but also part of the various sub-groups of the church.

The notion that church identity is not about buildings is disavowed by this research and the exhibited strength of attachment that people do have to their buildings. That attachment, identified in the locative threads, is associated with a member's sense of belonging to a physical expression of

the church. The locative thread can be re-woven into a new member identity as people adapt to a new venue of church life. It can equally be transferred to another target location – lesser as seen in the ‘ownership’ of church pews, or greater in adopting a city wide name for the church.

A merger of churches provides a natural end to one sector of a life’s journey. If too much emphasis is placed on the end of a church, then there is little incentive to re-weave an identity with the ongoing church. This is equally true for the place of the individual member in the church and if they feel their involvement is to be ongoing. The temporal threads are woven when members connect themselves to the church’s story – past, present and future. This implies the need for a subtle balance between the impacts of change and continuity on church members.

It became clear in the research that churches have a poor record of articulating their mission purpose as a church. For many people, the Sunday service was the primary purpose of the church and that was challenged by the mergers. Where members were able to articulate a mission, by re-weaving purpose threads, they were able to make sense of their ongoing membership.

Churches develop their own traditions and ways of doing things that are brought into question by a merger. Identity work helps to make sense of the procedures and allows the member to say ‘this how *we* do it’ rather than how ‘*they*’ do it. New ways are woven in the procedural threads and become part of the fabric of church member identity.

Assessing a value on membership is a subjective process that requires the member to make sense of the connections of the other threads of identity. Some members may invest strongly in one thread (a church building, for example) while others take a broader approach to their membership. The valuative threads of identity highlight the importance of membership.

The six threads are also interwoven with each other. For example, in both churches of this study the loss of church buildings had a significant impact on the members sense of identity. But those interviewed in the study – who continued to be members of the merged churches – were able to compensate for the loss of locative identity by celebrating the other threads woven into their membership.

The six threads of member identity are also not equal. There exists an individual difference in the threads that suggest that members will be impacted on different threads. An individual with strong locative attachments to a church building left the church and a member with strong relational threads mourned the loss of friendships.

8.2 Member identity in church life

A church merger is a revolutionary change for members, but any church (or organisation) is constantly facing evolutionary change where members must continue to make sense of their identity. By suggesting that the content of member identity exists over six threads, there are questions to be asked of the church related to how, within their context and point of history, they provide opportunities for people to weave identity.

Being aware of the relational threads of member identity should encourage a church to understand how new relationships develop into membership. Many churches are now asking if such relationships will happen best in a formal worship setting or in a more informal space (such as the Breakfast Group in Church Alpha). The focus on relationships seeks to find a way that newcomers can be involved and known – by providing name tags and taking telephone numbers for later contact.

Relational threads are understood to be woven in ways consistent with Social Identity theories at all levels of a church. In smaller churches that identity is woven largely on the congregation at worship on a Sunday morning, whereas in larger churches identity may be woven in some of the many smaller groups of the church. In such circumstances the relational thread may be stronger than identity to the church over the other threads.

In the past church was synonymous with the formal building with pews, pulpit and a pervading silence. Today the locative threads are more widely woven, but people still connect to a physical place to gather (be it a hall, café or home church). A physical location of where church meets provides a contextual space to weave relationships, procedures and purpose. There is also a word of caution for churches who seek to maintain two or more venues for church worship while affirming a one-ness or unity. Member identity may be diluted when locative threads are not consistent with the other threads.

A tacit understanding of what the church is about is no longer present in New Zealand society. For instance, the Salvation Army is well known as a social agency, but it is struggling to convey to society that they are also a church that worships on a Sunday. In a similar way, many see the sole purpose of a local church as hosting a Sunday morning worship service of a particular style or liturgy.

The purpose threads are no longer woven at a denominational level but arise from the work of a local congregation. That work is more than just the Sunday service, but expresses the core mission of the local church and reason for being. When a church has a clear sense of purpose it enables people to weave an identity with it.

Technology has transformed many of the ways that we do things and how we interact as human beings. Old traditions have fallen away in society and we have become more individualised because of it, but every generation has their own traditions. The procedural threads do not weave alone, but must reflect a sense of value, purpose and connectedness with other people. How we do church must make sense to those who are invited to be members of the church.

It has been suggested that there are three competing narratives in church meetings – to develop the faith, to grow the church, or to maintain the traditions (McNamee, 2011). The threads metaphor may imply that there are six narratives, all interwoven, where church members seek to enhance their own belonging and make sense of their own woven identity.

One central phase for church goers is the “cost of discipleship” – implying that following the path of Christ does not always come easily. Membership of the church demands both costs and rewards and these are evaluated against the weaving of the other threads of member identity. This is equally true for other voluntary groups, such as an amateur theatre group, where personal commitment and cost supply the life-blood to the organisation.

A challenge for the church is to realise that the valuative threads are woven in a new social context. In the past Sunday morning was set aside for worship (whether one attended church or not) but today Sundays are often the busiest day of the week for families as they participate in sports and social activities. This implies that that value of church membership is competing against other valued associations.

8.3 Member identity in organisational mergers

In merger situations and more generally in organisations it is understood that relationship development is a central element of identity work. For this reason many organisations will undertake team building exercises, seeking to deepen relationships. But the relational threads are not woven in isolation and it can be suggested that being aware of the other five threads may help develop relational connections, and *vice versa*. For instance, a relationship building retreat held at a venue away from the organisational base removes distractions and breaks old patterns of behaviour but may diminish aspects of identity developed through sharing a common location.

This study suggested that people developed closer relationships through working together on matters raised by a merger. Relationship building is interwoven with the other threads – working in a common location, narrating a similar story, having a shared purpose, following the same procedures and valuing the sense of belonging.

Questions about location in an organisational merger are often focussed on practical and financial implications. The exploration of the locative threads invite consideration of how identity is woven in a physical environment and the impact that location plays in identity work undertaken. This raises questions of how a member of a merging organisation might rebuild their sense of belonging to a place. This is especially pertinent when someone is moving into the 'territory' of another party in the merger.

The temporal threads invite a consideration of the organisational legacy – both past and future – and the impact on the organisational member. It is a reminder that the story of 'how we got here' is an important element of who we are as members of an organisation. In a merger situation the hasty removal of any remnants from the previous organisation may highlight the discontinuity of the merger and inhibit identity work on the new organisation. If the merger is seen as part of an ongoing change process, identity work may also be inhibited on the temporal threads.

The purpose threads challenge the merging organisation to identify where they are headed – a person doesn't get on a bus without knowing the destination. It can be suggested that mergers that do not have an explicit sense of purpose (for the merger or organisation itself) may limit the re-weaving of their members' identity.

The research suggests that member identity may be woven with a variety of purpose threads that may, or may not, coincide with the declared purpose of the organisation. An example may be two businesses that merge, with one having a strong profit motive and the other a strong customer service.

As mergers introduce new ways of doing things, the procedural threads call on members to share in the new way and affirms a fairness for all members. Having to think about new procedures highlights the newness of the organisation and the challenge of membership. People become more comfortable when they think they know what they are doing and this enables member identity to strengthen.

Old dogs can learn new tricks, but generally they are smarter about getting a reward. The valutive threads invite participants of a merger to evaluate their sense of belonging across the breadth of the threads of identity, not only in effort but also in reward. Ongoing membership of the organisation makes sense when they can contribute to something worthwhile beyond themselves and gain value for themselves.

As studies into organisational mergers have shown, elements such as branding, site location, leadership and social interaction play a part in the perception of a successful merger. There seems,

however, to be an element of timing when it is the right time to loosen the threads of identity from the pre-merge organisation and re-weave into the new. The tricky task of the change manager is to assist people to find the right timing for that identity work to happen.

8.4 Re-weaving identity in organisational psychology

The metaphorical threads of identity have been suggested as a device to explore the content of member identity within the context of an organisation, rather than just consider the development of identity (Gallagher, McLean & Syed, 2017). That content exists in the six threads of identity and is expressed in emotions, behaviours and thoughts through a range of contexts in periods of time. The member undertakes identity work by weaving the threads and making sense of their membership. This suggests a congruence between a member and the organisational identity (Brickson, 2013) that allows a member identity to be woven.

Blake Ashforth has argued

“that organizational scholarship would be well-served by focusing more on (1) the core aspect of identification, namely, the definition of self in terms of a target; (2) other targets of identification aside from the organization; (3) the dark side of identification; and (4) perspectives of identity beyond social identity theory/self-categorization theory (SIT/SCT) (Ashforth, 2016, 361).”

The threads metaphor invites an exploration of the weaving of identity between the member and the organisation beyond a simple relational construct and opens a consideration of how strong or weak threads may help or inhibit identity work. A strong locative thread, for example, may inhibit a member from moving to a new organisational place or may enhance their ability to cope with change in other areas of identity.

The threads of member identity metaphor provides a dynamic tool that helps elucidate the content of member identity within an organisational context. It does not provide answers for those who seek to control but gives questions for those who seek to make sense of who they are. The making sense element of identity work is an equivalent task for the change manager.

8.5 Using the metaphor

The threads of identity metaphor provides a mechanism by which people can analyse the impact of organisational change on the identity of the organisational members. The metaphor is based on the understanding that member identity is contextual, in both situation and time, and suggests that

member identity consists of six key threads. The content of member identity is relational, locative, temporal, purposive, procedural and valuative – but the threads do not necessarily share equivalence. Individual difference accounts for the impact of organisational change effecting people differently, so people weave their member identity with threads of differing importance. For example, some members will value relationships far higher than buildings, or purpose above procedures.

As an analytical tool, the threads provide a framework for questions to be asked, across the breadth of the organisation, into the impact of change on member identity. In the simplest of terms these questions may be something like;

- **Who** are the people that make up the key grouping of the organisation and how do people identify with that group?
- **Where** do people identify as the organisational home and place where they feel at home?
- **When** talking of the organisation, are people reflecting both a past and future?
- **Why** do people say they want to belong to the organisation?
- **How** are the procedures enhancing the members sense of belonging to the organisation?
- **What** value is there for members in an ongoing membership of the organisation?

In exploring the full content of member identity there is an opportunity to consider areas of organisational life that either enhance or inhibit identity work. For change managers this is an analytical tool that encourages an understanding of member identity beyond their own sense of belonging. This was demonstrated in the Church Beta case studies where ministers who were recent arrivals in the parish underestimated the importance of the buildings and history.

The value of using the threads of member identity will be found in the exploration of organisational change across a breadth of content. It will identify areas of organisational change that could be identified as points of resistance – and re-frame that resistance into a form of active identity work. Identity work is therefore construed as a constructive activity as opposed to the perceived destructiveness of resistance to change.

It has long been known that people want to belong, and the threads of member identity suggest that people belong not just to a group, but to a place, a history, a purpose, a way of doing things and sense of value. These threads are woven in the interaction between the individual and the organisation to form the member identity or sense of belonging that is essential for the ongoing life of the organisation, especially in the voluntary sector. This research provides a metaphorical tool to help understand the content of member identity.

Appendix 1 Information and Consent Forms



MASSEY UNIVERSITY
TE KUNENGA KI PŪREHUROA
UNIVERSITY OF NEW ZEALAND

School of Psychology
Te Kura Hinengaro Tangata
Palmerston North

Weaving Threads of Identity

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Introduction

My name is Peter MacKenzie: I am an ordained Presbyterian minister, currently working for Uniting Congregations of Aotearoa New Zealand (overseeing Cooperative Ventures throughout New Zealand). I am undertaking PhD research to explore the ways in which church mergers affect congregational identity. This research is supported by UCANZ and is being supervised by Massey University School of Psychology.

The aim of the research is to investigate concepts of identity and change with churches undergoing a merger. Interviews with participants in a church merger are being conducted to give a greater understanding of the processes that occur and to provide resources for future mergers. The results will form the research section of a PhD thesis to be presented to Massey University, probably in 2015.

Participation in the Research

To gather data it is intended to have an interview/conversation with a number of people which will take around 45-60 minutes each. The conversation will seek to unpack some of the concepts that people hold about what the church is and their place within the church. The conversation will be digitally recorded so that the responses can be transcribed and thoughtfully considered. It is intended that some follow-up interviews will be conducted at a later date and further permission will be sought for that.

Participants in the research are being sought from churches that are currently merging. Names of possible participants have been sought from the church office or through church notices – there is no compulsion to participate. It is not expected that the questions will raise emotional issues for participants.

Confidentiality

Confidentiality is considered important - participants will be allocated a code and individual responses will not be identified. A person may opt out of the research at any point and their data will be removed from the study. The names and contact details of all participants

will be held by the researcher during the study, but will not be shared with any other party. A participant may indicate their wish to have their data saved in an official archive.

Your Rights

If you decide to participate you will have the right to:

- Ask additional questions at any time
- Decline to answer any particular question
- Ask for the recorder to be turned off at any time during the interview
- Withdraw from the study at any time
- Refer concerns to an academic supervisor
- Be given access to a summary of the findings

Researcher Peter MacKenzie
Peter@ucanz.org.nz

Supervisor: Dr Jocelyn Handy, School of Psychology, Massey University
J.A.Handy@massey.ac.nz

Co-Supervisor: A/Prof Craig Prichard, School of Management, Massey University
C.Prichard@massey.ac.nz

This project has been evaluated by peer review and judged to be low risk. Consequently, it has not been reviewed by one of the University's Human Ethics Committees. The researcher named above is responsible for the ethical conduct of this research.

If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research that you wish to raise with someone other than the researcher, please contact Professor John O'Neill, Director (Research Ethics), telephone 06 350 5249, email humanethics@massey.ac.nz



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Weaving Threads of Identity

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM - INDIVIDUAL

I have read the Information Sheet and have had the details of the study explained to me.

My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.

I agree/do not agree to the interview being sound recorded.

I wish/do not wish to have data placed in an official archive.

I agree/do not agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.

Signature:

.....

Date:

.....

Full Name - printed

.....

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