Koinonia and Anachoresis:
An Exploration of the Concept and Practice of Simple Living as a Christian Response to Consumerism

Valerio, Ruth

Awarding institution:
King's College London

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Author: Ruth Valerio

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An Exploration of the Concept and Practice of Simple Living as a Christian Response to Consumerism

Ruth Valerio

Kings College London

Doctorate in Theology and Ministry

2013

A Thesis presented for the Doctorate of Theology and Ministry,

Department of Education and Professional Studies

Kings College London,

Franklin-Wilkins Building

Waterloo Road

London SE1 9NH

ABSTRACT

This thesis aims to provide an answer to the question of how one lives well as a Christian in consumer society by looking at the concept of simple living and considering what resources it has to offer.

That we live in a society shaped by consumerism is not contested. How that consumerism unfolds, however, and how a Christian is to respond to those forces, is widely debated. Consumerism poses a number of significant challenges to the Christian believer and those who attempt to practice some form of simplicity would claim that this furnishes them with a way of meeting and counteracting those challenges. Although works on consumerism abound, both the concept and practice of simplicity have received scant attention in academic circles. This thesis seeks to make a small step in filling that lacuna.

Using both quantitative and qualitative research, the thesis is based on a substantial piece of empirical research focussed on a self-styled, 'simpler living' Christian network, called Breathe. The research is designed to explore a nexus of issues around what sort of person is involved with Breathe; what they think simplicity is; in what ways they see the decisions they are making as responding to consumerism, and what relationship this has to their faith.

What becomes clear is that the attempts of the Breathe members to simplify their lives are not undertaken as a whim, but emanate from clear ideological convictions. Arising from the results of this research, the thesis thus considers how Breathe has emerged from the intersection of a number of different discursive frameworks – global, political, cultural and ecclesiological – and seeks to unpack these.

The final section of the thesis takes the research findings and looks to provide a theological articulation for what Breathe members are trying to do, with the aim of moving towards developing a theology of simplicity. As a part of this, we consider a series of tensional relationships that Breathe members live within and we then develop a theological framework to enable us to make sense of what is taking place. The long tradition of discussion around happiness and well-being associated with Aristotle and Aquinas is drawn on as we develop an understanding of simplicity as a justice-focussed eudaimonist ethic.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The route to this thesis began with an interest in the subject of simplicity in its own right, as it is a way of life that my husband and I have tried to pursue through the majority of our married life[1]. In our personal and professional lives we are both actively engaged in issues of earth care, social justice and community involvement. As we worked and campaigned on these issues, and financially supported others doing likewise, we came to the conclusion that we needed also to be looking at how our lives contributed to the very problems we were trying to address and, therefore, how we might begin living differently. The last eighteen years has been a challenging, inspiring and fun journey along this path.

Some time into our married life I was asked to co-write a course entitled, *Simplicity, Love and Justice*.[2] It was the first time I had properly met the word 'simplicity', but as I encountered others who were also travelling in this direction – whether virtually, in books or in person – I realised that it was this word that they used to describe the way of life we were trying to lead. My initial interest for this thesis, therefore, was to examine this (generally rather vague) notion of simplicity; to determine whether it could be defined more closely; to see what were its key characteristics and, particularly important to me in the context of my Christian faith, to ask from what theological basis simple living arises, bearing in mind that simplicity is not exclusively Christian.

Two factors informed the direction that this interest in simple living took in the thesis. Firstly, as I read the more popular writings on simplicity, and both ran and attended conferences, I became increasingly aware that contemporary understandings of simplicity are forged within, and are a response to, the context of consumer culture. Thus I came to see that simplicity is not something that can be considered by itself: it

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[1] The terms, 'simple living', and, 'simplicity', will be used interchangeably throughout.
[2] J. Odgers, *Simplicity, Love and Justice*.

has to be understood within the context within which it is being outworked: hence the latter aspect of the strapline of the thesis title.

The second factor was a recognition of the strengths and weaknesses of the literature around this concept, particularly from a Christian perspective. On the one hand, as we will see in Chapter Three, contemporary out-workings of simplicity form part of an ongoing dialogue around a number of issues concerning a Christian approach to material goods (often emerging from a monastic context); formation within consumer society, and a Christian response to issues of social justice and earth care.

On the other hand, however, a specific focus on the possibilities of simple living as an effective response has not been considered fully by formal academic theology, despite the wide range of popular-level literature. The work of Cavanaugh and Dawn, which will be considered further on, begin to point the way as they highlight some of the practices with which Christians might embrace in order to live faithfully within consumer society.[3] But, as I began investigating my research area, it became obvious that there was a gap in the theological literature with which I needed to engage. Doing a piece of empirical research on a group of people trying to live more simply thus presented itself as the most fruitful route into this topic.

In sum, then, I came to realise that the question this thesis was really trying to answer – which indeed is the question that I spend most of my life trying to answer – is, *how does one live well as a Christian in consumer culture?* Of course, I am not the only one asking this question, and many different responses are both articulated and implicitly lived out by contemporary Christians. However, simple living is a notable response that is proving attractive to a number of people. The aim of this thesis, then, is to investigate this way of living and consider how it provides one particular answer to the underlying research question.

As an exploration of the foundational research question, this thesis comprises three particular discussions. Firstly, it examines a concrete expression of simplicity by

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[3] W. Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire*, M. Dawn, *Unfettered Hope: A Call to Faithful Living in an Affluent Society*.

looking at Breathe: a network of people who are all committed to the concept of simple living and are trying to outwork its practice in various ways. Secondly, there is an examination of the key contextual dialogues that have given rise to Breathe; to the concerns that its members hold and to the steps that they are taking in their lives. Thirdly, the discussion focuses on how Breathe and the attempt to live more simply can be understood within a specifically Christian theological framework. It is through the intersection of these three different discussions that we are enabled to reach some properly theological conclusions.

This thesis argues that living a more simple life moves us towards an effective response to the research question of how one can live well as a Christian within consumer culture. However, as will be explicated, it can only do so if it successfully negotiates some significant tensions and maintains a successful rhythm of relational engagement – *koinonia* - and withdrawal – *anachoresis*. In addition, it does not in itself provide a complete response to our question because of its focus on personal, lifestyle actions rather than on engagement with the macro issues of our world and its political structures and systems. Nevertheless, the concept and practice of simplicity contains within it much that is deeply significant for the Church and offers challenges that Christians should be prepared to take up and embrace.

The question that this research seeks to answer is a key one for contemporary Christians. For effective discipleship to take place, we must understand the consumer context within which we live, and the challenges it poses as well as the benefits that can be embraced. Despite being a subject that Christians – at both an academic and popular level – have been wrestling with for a number of decades now, there is still fresh work being done and further avenues to be explored.[4] This thesis provides an original perspective on this whole area because of its empirical nature and its emphasis on real life examples of how particular Christians are trying to live in their particular situations. As will be highlighted in Chapter Three, commentary on consumer culture and its antidotes can all too easily fall prey to the temptation of

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[4] Not least this is because, in our globalised world, the nature of consumerism is constantly shifting and in need of re-appraisal. More recent attempts to engage with this subject include V. Miller, *Consuming Religions: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture*; T. Beaudoin, *Consuming Faith: Integrating Who We Are With What We Buy*; Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed*, and, J. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview and Cultural Formation*.

grand meta-theorising and paying scant attention to the realities of people's actual lives. Being rooted in the initial empirical research, this thesis seeks to remain true to those experiences and bring them to bear in the later, more theoretical discussions.

The argument of the thesis is broken down into the following three chapters. After this Introduction, Chapter Two constitutes the empirical research, carried out on Breathe. Breathe are a loosely connected internet group who come together under the banner of 'less stuff, more life' and describe themselves as existing to, 'connect people who want to live a less consumerist, more generous, more sustainable life'.[5] They send out regular emails to their members containing thoughtful articles and suggestions for action; have produced a series of videos for small-group reflection, and hold occasional conferences.[6] Breathe have been chosen as a useful group to facilitate the consideration of what simplicity is and what it looks like when lived out in consumer culture. As just mentioned, basing the thesis on such empirical research reflects the desire to move away from what Bretherton calls, 'the dangers of abstraction' and, instead, to consider, 'what faithful witness among these people, at this time, and in this place, might involve'.[7] The research for this chapter consists of an online questionnaire, which went to the breadth of the Breathe membership, through their mailing list, and a series of in-depth interviews. What emerges from the research is an interest in simplicity that embraces a holistic understanding centred on relationship with God, with others, with oneself and with the wider creation.

Chapter Three then explores the contexts within which Breathe's understanding of, and desire for, simple living has arisen. Breathe members do not live in a vacuum: they are clearly responding to strong currents within contemporary life. Those currents are threefold: global, social and ecclesiological.

Globally, we will see that Breathe stands within ongoing debates on globalisation and the impact that globalisation is having on people and places around the world. There is a deep concern for issues of poverty and environmental degradation and a strong

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[5] www.breathenetwork.org.

[6] An example of one of the videos can be viewed at, http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=c4o2EfpxWGo.

[7] L. Bretherton, '"How Shall We Sing the Lord's Song in a Strange Land?": A Response to the Symposium', *Political Theology* 12.3, 472.

desire to live in ways that connect with these issues positively. Socially, there is an inherent unease with consumer culture and the detrimental effects it is deemed to have on relationships and on more existential issues around the pressure to consume. Again, we see Breathe members as seeking to respond to these issues and trying to live differently, in ways that both enhance relationships and improve their own sense of well-being. Ecclesiologically, Breathe will be mapped at the overlapping of a number of recent developments within UK church life. In this section we look at a nexus of issues around the recovery of an environmental theology, and of the riches of monasticism; the place of simplicity in a concern for issues of global poverty; the tradition of Christian simplicity and radical dissent, and discussions around ecclesiology and Christian formation in consumer society. Through this chapter we see that our participants respond to these three discursive frameworks with the rhythm of engagement and withdrawal.

By the time we get to Chapter Four we are ready to provide a Christian framework for simplicity and to explore our research from a theological perspective. Here, we consider three dangers, emerging through the preceding chapters, with which Breathe members are wrestling in their desire to live more simply.

We look first at the need to avoid a therapeutic understanding of Christianity that would see the move towards a more simple life as being exclusively concerned with one's own well-being without recourse to wider issues of social justice and ecological breakdown. Secondly, we consider where Breathe must be wary of certain understandings of simplicity that lead to an attitude of world-denial and a rejection of material goods. Thirdly, the dangers of retreating into an oppositional enclave are highlighted.

This discussion leaves us with the question of how we might provide a theological articulation for the lifestyle decisions that our research participants are making. We find a helpful way forward in an exploration of a *eudaimonist* ethic, based initially in Aristotle but developed more fully in Aquinas. We consider the notion of *eudaimonia* ('happiness', or, 'well being') as understood by Aquinas and discuss its relevance to a Christian perspective on a culture that is geared towards finding happiness in

consumption. In particular, our focus on Aquinas leads inevitably into his explication of the virtues and the thesis reaches its culmination in a consideration of the relationship between the virtues of temperance and justice. The conclusion reached is that the desire for, and practice of, a more simple life is only properly Christian when, as part of the movement towards life in God, justice is its goal.

Every Christian, in every time, has to face the question of what it means to live with integrity in their situation, with the benefits and challenges that each cultural framework brings. Today is no less the case. Our contemporary context is highly flawed and deeply ambiguous, presenting significant challenges to the follower of Jesus who is called to 'spend themselves on behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed'.[8] My belief is that the call to a more simple life is one that should be heard throughout the Church, and my hope is that this thesis will enable that call to be heard.

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[8] Isaiah 58:10.

CHAPTER TWO

THE EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

The empirical research for this thesis is based on the group called Breathe. Predominantly Evangelical ecclesiologically, Breathe are a loosely affiliated group of people who are interested in trying to live a more simple life: describing themselves as, 'a Christian network for simpler living'.

I first became aware of them through a friend who was involved in establishing the group in 2005. She knew that Breathe were talking about things in which I was interested and so invited me to sign up to receive their updates and come to their first conference, which I duly did. Breathe is thus a group with whom I am familiar and, to a certain extent, stand within.

PART I: QUESTIONNAIRE ANALYSIS

In October 2010, an email was sent out to the Breathe mailing list of around 800 people, asking for their participation in an online survey, carried out through Survey Monkey. In all, 218 people responded, giving a response rate of just over 25%.

1) Demographic Profile

1. Age
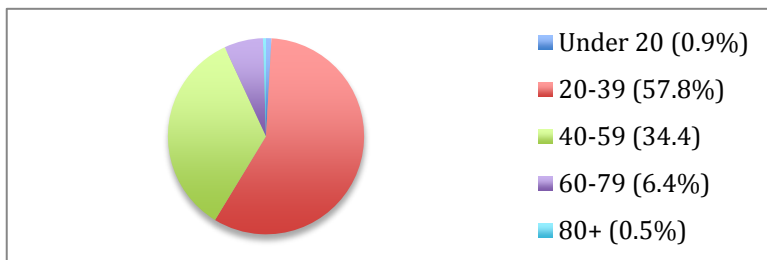
2. Gender

3. Ethnic Background

- Bangladeshi
- Black African
- Black Caribbean
- Black Other
- Chinese
- Indian
- Other Asian
- Other ethnic group
- Other mixed ethnic group
- Pakistani
- White (96%)
- White and Asian
- White and Black African
- White and Black Caribbean
- Do not wish to disclose
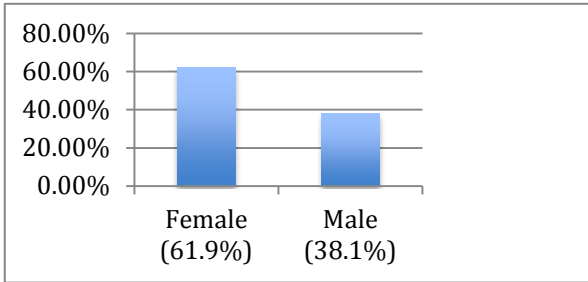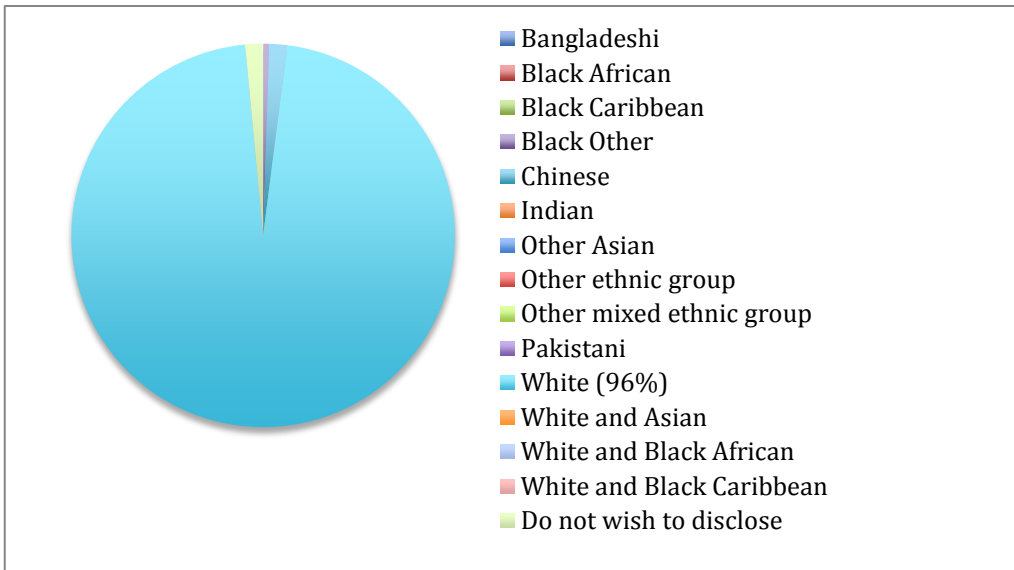
4. Geographical Location

- Scotland (0.9%)
- Northern Ireland (0.5%)
- Wales (0.9%)
- East (5.1%)
- East Midlands (6.5%)
- London (27.6%)
- Outside the UK (3.2%)
- North East (0.5%)
- Norht West (8.3%)
- South East (20.7%)
- South West (6.9%)
- West Midlands (8.8%)
- Yorkshire and Humber (10.1%)

5. Work Occupation

Homemaker (5.6%)
Student (7.9%)
Business (12.5%)
Charity worker (25%)
Unemployed (2.8%)
Self-employed (6.9%)
Carer (1.4%)
Public sector (17.6%)
Other (20.4%)

6. Income Range

Below £10k (19.2%)
£10k-19k (20.6%)
£20k-39k (45.8%)
£40k-49k (6.5%)
Above £50k (7.9)
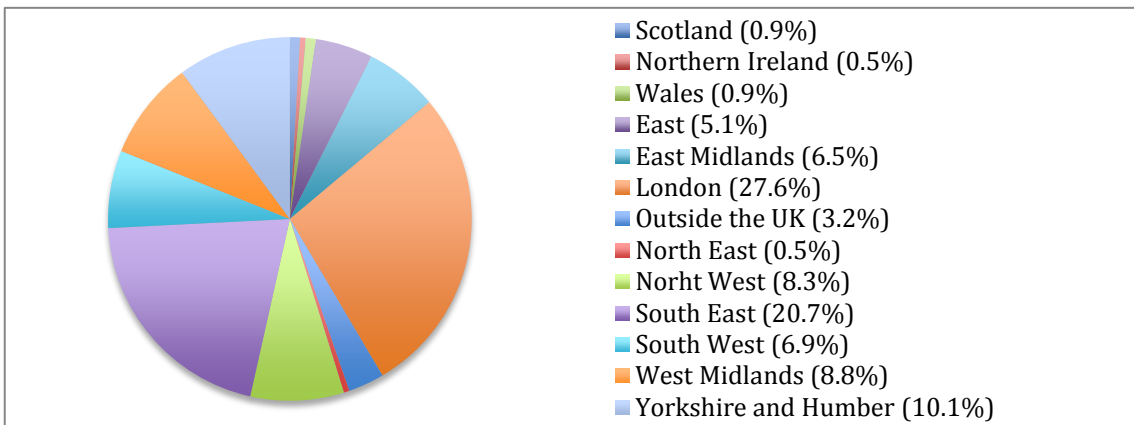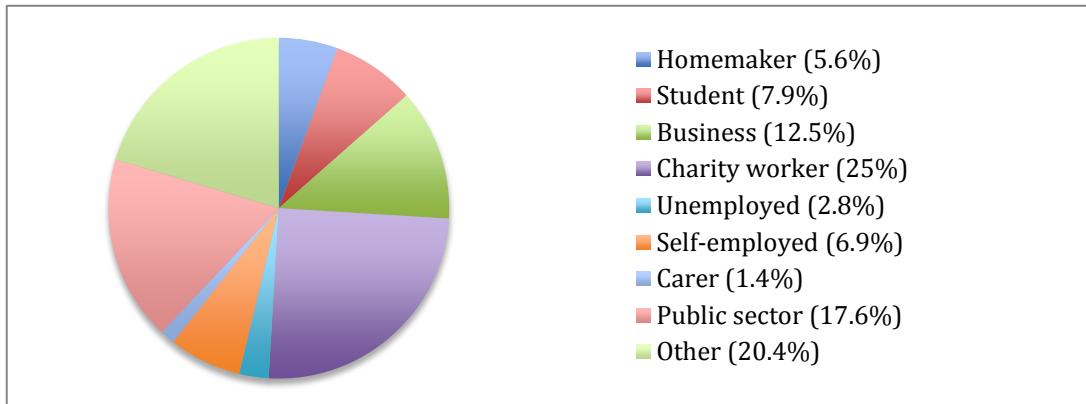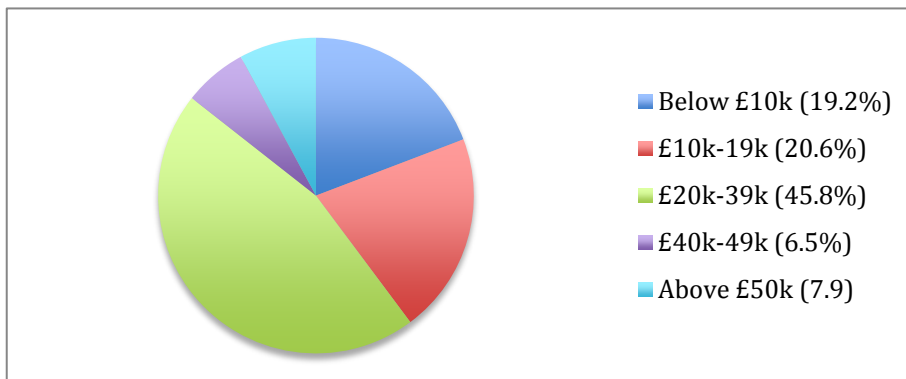
A clear demographic profile can be seen in the Breathe respondents. The majority (62%) are female and are aged between 20 and 39. They are nearly exclusively White. Just over a majority (55%) live in London or the South, with the others scattered fairly evenly around the rest of England (and very few in the other nations).

The respondents come from a range of occupations, with charity worker being the highest category. Just under 3% are unemployed (the latest national figures place unemployment at 7.8% of the economically active population[9]). When the responses to 'other' are analysed, a number of them are teachers or working for the NHS, which then brings the public sector category up to around 22%. 6% of respondents are in full-time church leadership.

Financially, Breathe are fairly representative of the population as a whole, although they lean slightly towards the wealthier end. The most recent figures are from

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[9] http://www.statistics.gov.uk/cci/nugget.asp?id=12 (accessed 30.11.12)

2006/7, at which time the median income for households in the UK was £20,000 (ie 50% of households earned more and 50% earned less). With Breathe, 40% are below £20k and 60% are above. 10% of the UK population earn over £40k and 6% earn more than £50k a year.[10] With Breathe those figures rise slightly to just over 14% and nearly 8% respectively.

These findings tie in with the ethnographic work of Mary Grigsby on the Voluntary Simplicity movement in the USA, where she also found the vast majority of those involved in the movement to be white, Western and middle-class.[11] And, although making conscious decisions to live on less and reduce expenditure, they made a distinction between themselves and the notion of being poor, 'because of the social and cultural capital that the poor lack'.[12] This notion of cultural capital – deriving from Bourdieu, who is considered further in Chapter Three – is also highlighted by Micheletti in her examination of political consumerism. She finds that cultural, or social, capital is both a necessary condition for political consumerism to take place, and also a significant outcome, as new social capital is created by such participation.[13]

2) Involvement With Breathe

7. How long have you been involved with Breathe?

- ■ Under a year (42.2%)
- ■ 1 year (21%)
- ■ 2 years (16.9%)
- ■ 3 years (10.8%)
- ■ 4+ years (5.1%)

8. Have you been to any of the Breathe gatherings?

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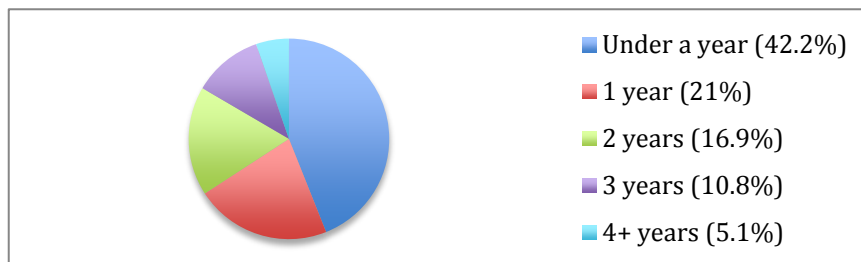
[10] http://www.kgbanswers.co.uk/what-percentage-of-the-uk-population-earn-more-than-40k-per-annum/15466891 (accessed 6.5.11)

[11] M. Grigsby, *Buying Time and Getting By: The Voluntary Simplicity Movement*, 54 – 59.

[12] Grigsby, *Buying Time*, 59

[13] M. Michelleti, *Political Virtue and Shopping: Individuals, Consumerism, and Collective Action*, xiii.
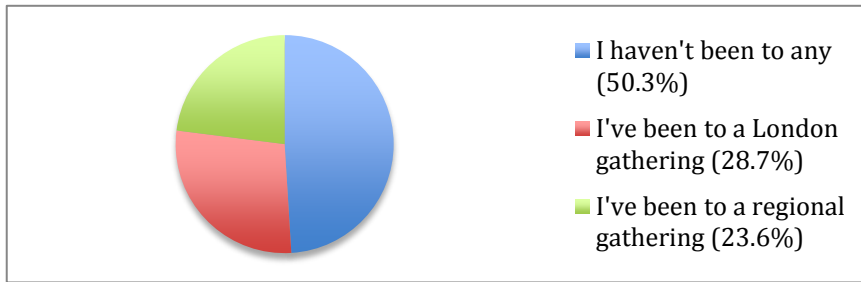
Pie chart legend:
- I haven't been to any (50.3%)
- I've been to a London gathering (28.7%)
- I've been to a regional gathering (23.6%)

9. Have you taken the Breathe 'Promise of Life'?

Bar chart: Yes (28.7%), No (71.3%)

10. How important were the following in drawing you to Breathe?

Bar chart categories: I wanted an opportunity to connect with like-minded people; They were talking about issues that interested me; I was feeling frustrated with my life and wanted help to change; Other
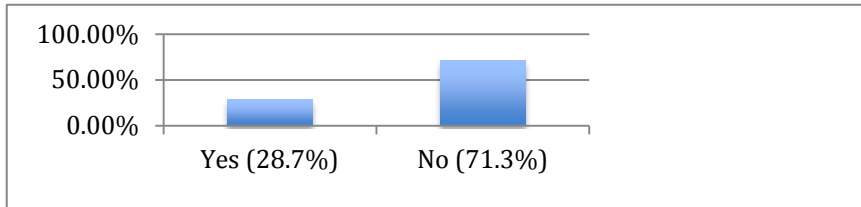
Legend: Most important, Of some importance, Less significant, Of no importance
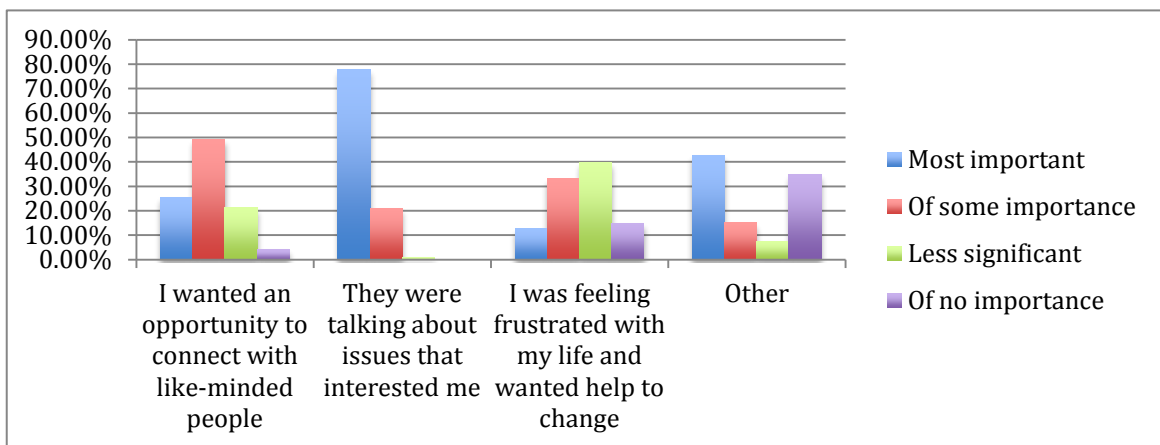
Breathe is a young organisation still in the process of establishing itself. So, only a small majority have been involved with Breathe for more than a year: two-thirds of people have been involved for one year or less; half of the people have not been to any Breathe events, and a large majority (71%) have not taken the Breathe 'Promise for Life': their 'covenant of aspirations' for those committing themselves to the simpler life for which Breathe stands.

This is not necessarily negative: it simply reflects the age of the group and its type. As a 'virtual' community, Breathe operates as a service provider, giving information/encouragement/support to those who are seeking to walk along a

particular path in life. As we will see later in the interviews, people very much appreciate the emails they receive from Breathe. Ironically, in that sense, people are consumers of Breathe's products. Getting them to engage more proactively, however - as in going to an event or signing up to something - is not so easy.

This does not detract from what Breathe does. The strong response rate for these questionnaires demonstrates a high interest in the idea of simplicity, as does the fact that 44% of respondents said they would be happy to give an in-depth interview. Clearly, the respondents are committed to the idea of simplicity, like to talk about it and see Breathe as a playing a part in that.

This is born out by the final question of this section. The main reason why people are attracted to Breathe is that they are talking about issues that interest them. Breathe, therefore, seems to be connecting with people who are already interested in the idea of simplicity to one degree or another (nearly 80%: this figure jumps to 99% when you combine 'most important' with 'of some importance'), rather than with people who feel frustrated with where they are and want help to change (just under 13%).

42% of people said that there was another factor that was 'most important' in drawing them to Breathe, and twenty-three people specified what that was. Quite a few of the responses, on closer analysis, tied in with the choices given in the question. So, for example, one respondent said that they wanted to, 'identify with and support people offering a different view to secular materialism and consumerism', a view which reflects the first option. Another person said they, 'wanted to be involved in the discussion on simplicity', reflecting the second option, and a further response said, 'I want to live more simply and more sustainably... to find ways of integrating these within a too-busy life (at the moment)', reflecting the third choice. Five people said that they were drawn to Breathe through knowing people who were already involved with it (a point to which we shall return). Three people highlighted the particularly Biblical/Christian nature of Breath's approach as being helpful and positive.

One can surmise from the answers in this section that Breathe members view Breathe not so much as something to challenge and provoke them as something that will confirm and encourage them, with perhaps a smattering of challenge thrown in.

3) Consumerism

11. What do you think are the main problems with consumerism (tick as many options as you like)?
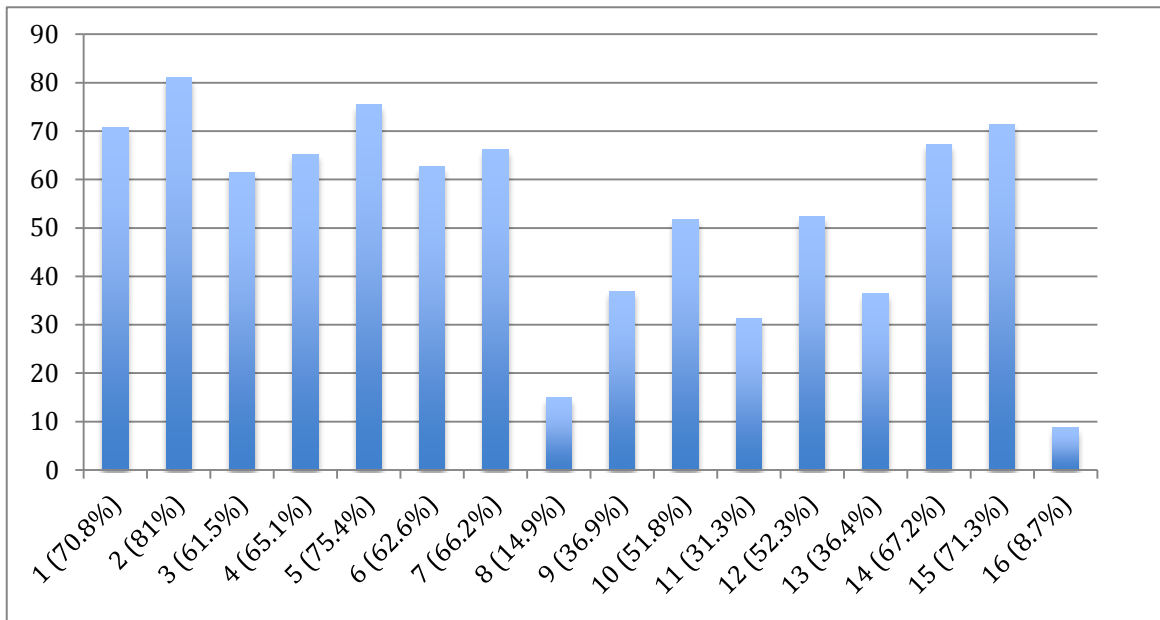
1. It is using up the earth's resources too quickly
2. It is using the earth's resources unfairly
3. It creates an economic imbalance between those who produce and those who consume
4. It is only interested in money, not in social or ecological good
5. It produces a society that is too busy and pressured
6. It creates a distance between ourselves and the products we buy with the result that we don't know where they have come from or what conditions they were produced in
7. It produces people who are predominantly interested in themselves
8. It creates a monochrome society

9. It creates people who don't know how to stick at relationships, thus contributing to the breakdown of families

10. It produces a Christian culture that is more interested in 'getting' from church than in 'receiving'

11. It creates Christians who 'church hop' rather than commit to one church

12. It has de-skilled us, so that we no longer know how to produce things ourselves

13. We have become addicted to technology

14. It cultivates a lack of thankfulness in us

15. It squeezes out space for God

16. Other

12. Looking at the list again, please tick the three which you think are the most important
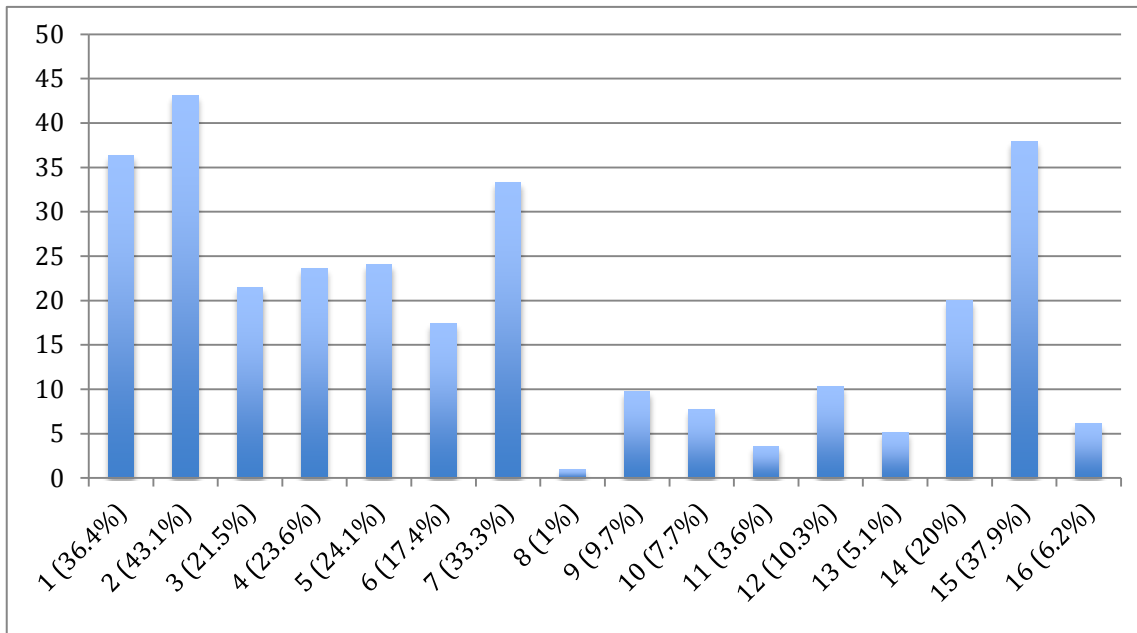
Regarding question eleven, out of the fifteen specified options for what might be the main problems with consumerism, eleven (73%) of them were chosen by more than half of the respondents, showing that consumerism is clearly something that those who are linked in with Breathe find problematic and have an opinion on.

What is of most interest, though, is seeing which options people felt most strongly about. There were four things that 70% or more of respondents saw as being problems with consumerism:

1. it is using the earth's resources unfairly (81%)
2. it is producing a society that is too busy and pressured (75%)
3. it squeezes out space for God (71%), and
4. it is using the earth's resources too quickly (71%).

These four points together comprise what I would suggest are the four main areas that simplicity seeks to speak into: addressing the problems of social injustice (Gandhi's, 'live more simply that others may simply life'); looking at questions of the inner self and 'the good life'; focusing on spirituality and one's relationship with God; and wanting to live in response to the ecological problems facing our world and its inhabitants.[14] It is significant that the four highest choices have demarcated these issues as clearly as they have. This begins to point us towards an integrated and holistic understanding that appears throughout our research.

What might be considered missing from Breathe's emphases is an understanding of the detrimental effects that consumerism can have on relationships. For example, the option that, 'it creates people who don't know how to stick at relationships, thus contributing to the breakdown of families', was only chosen by just short of 37% of people. However, it is not entirely absent. Possibly, the strong feeling that consumerism 'is producing a society that is too busy and pressured' is linked with the lack of time that people have to spend with their friends and family. It is also noticeable that the option that consumerism, 'produces people who are predominantly interested in themselves', was chosen by 66% of people and so still rates highly, even if it is not in the top four. Were I to design the questionnaire again, I would add the option of, 'it leaves me too busy to have enough quality time with friends and family'.

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[14] Chapter One, 'Cool lifestyle for a hot planet', in Duane Elgin's classic, *Voluntary Simplicity: toward a way of life that is outwardly simple, inwardly rich*, bears this out.

Examining question 12, which brings a degree of concentration to the broad nature of question 11, we see a similar trend at work. The four highest statements are almost the same as in question one, although interestingly the fourth has changed. Those statements are:

1. it is using the earth's resources unfairly (43%)
2. it squeezes out space for God (38%)
3. it uses the earth's resources too quickly (36%), and
4. it produces people who are only interested in themselves (33%).

Here, the sentiment that consumerism 'is producing a society that is too busy and pressured', is dropped in favour of, 'it produces people who are only interested in themselves'. It is not hard to see that the two are linked, however: where you have a society that is busy and pressured, people have to look to their own interests in order to survive existentially. Note that this fourth sentence picks up on the relational dimension highlighted in the previous paragraph, demonstrating that that is, in fact, a concern that respondents hold.

Two other aspects are notable in question twelve. The first is the broad range of options that are covered in the responses. So, whilst 43% of respondents chose the phrase, 'it is using the earth's resources unfairly', as being one of the three most important problems with consumerism, that statement does not stand out head and shoulders above the rest. Another scenario might envisage a situation whereby 70 or 80% of respondents saw that problem as a key one, reflecting the fact that 80% of respondents chose it in the previous question. And yet this has not happened here. When it comes to isolating the three most important problems with consumerism, there is clearly a range of opinions as to what those issues are.

In contrast we may consider which of the options people thought *least* important as problems within consumerism. In question eleven, the four lowest statements were:

1. it creates a monochrome society (15%)
2. it creates Christians who 'church hop' rather than commit to one church (31%)

3. we have become addicted to technology (36%), and
4. it creates people who don't know how to stick at relationships, thus contributing to the breakdown of families (37%).

In question twelve, the four statements that were chosen least were,

1. it creates a monochrome society (1%)
2. it creates Christians who 'church hop' rather than commit to one church (4%)
3. we have become addicted to technology (5%), and
4. it produces a Christian culture that is more interested in 'getting' from church than in 'receiving' (8%).

By far the majority of respondents, therefore, do not see these issues as the most important problems when it comes to consumer society. This is interesting because this is at a notable variance with contemporary writing on consumerism, be that Naomi Klein's, *No Logo* (which sets out to show that the whole of society has been branded in one form or another and that therefore various areas of society have lost their uniqueness and individuality), to John Drane's, *The McDonaldisation of the Church* and Phil Kenneson's and James Street's, *Selling Out the Church* (which look at the negative impacts of consumerism on the Church), to Marva Dawn's, *Unfettered Hope*, and Michael Budde's, *The (Magic) Kingdom of God* (both of which focus on the problems of technology), and a number of other writings too.

Finally, in this section on consumerism, twenty-five (13%) of respondents made their own comments on the main problems with consumerism. On analysis, they can be seen as broadly fitting into and reinforcing the categories that we have touched on above, rather than introducing anything strikingly different[15]. So, there is an understanding of the impact that consumerism has on others in poorer parts of the world: for example, 'it produces slaves of us who consume and of those who are "consumed" because of us', and, 'it creates a distance between production and use

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[15] The only comment that did not seem immediately to fit into any of our categories was the statement, 'we don't appreciate the handmade'. This, of course, would chime with Miller's discussions around commodification and Cavanaugh's discussions on detachment, which are considered further on in this chapter.

which means often consumers don't fully understand the impact they are having on the world around them'.

A large number of comments focused on the impact that consumerism has on ourselves, indicating that respondents might have liked this emphasised. One respondent said, 'it undermines any sense of contentment, creates restlessness and acquisitive habits', and another said, 'it makes people measure their self-worth by what they have, that they can't be happy with less, acquiring more stuff has become the default behaviour in society.

The impact of consumerism on matters of spirituality were also expressed: 'it creates people who think their value lies in what they own rather than who God considers them to be', and, 'it makes us value things rather than people, environment or God. It makes us unsatisfied and craving for more when we have enough. It opposes biblical contentment'. The church made an appearance here too, with one person stating, 'I'm concerned that consumerism has totally re-shaped our attitude towards church and what it means to be the church'. Looking ahead more positively, it was one person's view that consumerism, 'is a massive issue which cannot be sorted out overnight, I think we as church are the starting block to making massive change'.

In addition, comments were made about the ecological impact of consumerism: 'it distances us still further from our connection with nature', and, 'it's pushed out the rest of God's creatures from most of the planet – ecocide'.

Bearing in mind our reflections at the start of this section, a lot of the comments carried a more holistic emphasis, rather than only highlighting one of the above areas (God, or people, or self etc). This can be seen in the statement that consumerism, 'fosters discontent and the love of money/goods rather than God and other people'. This holistic understanding is brought out most forcibly in the assertion: 'we have lost our connectedness with the earth and also fail to see how all of humanity is linked together. In the rich countries our lifestyles are impacting on the poorer developing world causing climate change with all its problems. Consumerism is a justice issue'.

4) Simplicity

13. Can you explain in a couple of sentences what you think simple living is?

165 responses were given to this question, so I will analyse these responses first before looking at the other questions in this section. These responses have provided the richest material out of the whole questionnaire because here participants have not been given a pre-determined set of categories from which to choose: they are free to express their own views. The responses have furnished me with a wonderful insight into how participants view simplicity; their society; their inner desires, and their Christian faith.

Going through the responses, I noted down the key words and thoughts expressed, creating fifteen categories. I was very aware of the need for a heightened sense of self-reflexivity. As Mason says, 'descriptions and explorations involve selective viewing and interpretation; they cannot be neutral, objective or total. The elements which a researcher chooses to see as relevant for a description or exploration will be based, implicitly or explicitly, on a way of seeing the social world, and on a particular form of explanatory logic'. [16]

Inevitably I come to the idea of simplicity with strong conceptions and assumptions. It is also obvious that, through the course of the analysis done heretofore, I have already been forming ideas as to what directions the research is taking. It is unavoidable that I bring all of this with me as I analyse the responses to the question, 'what is simple living?', and I have tried to maintain a heightened awareness of that. In particular, going through the responses, the attempt was made to be attentive to things I was ignoring and *not* fitting into categories.

Nonetheless, on reading through what participants were saying, some notably dominant themes and patterns emerged.

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[16] J. Mason, *Qualitative Researching*, 6.

The strongest theme emerging was a word not actually used by the respondents, but it summarises so much of what was said and it will form part of the discussion throughout this thesis: *frugality*. Around 87% of the 165 responses expressed the idea of frugality in some specific way (and a number of those that did not carried it implicitly). What is meant by frugality is best expressed by letting the respondents speak for themselves:

> 'Not consuming what is unnecessary – think carefully before buying and using resources';

> 'Being content with and thankful for what we already have, striving only for what we and those around us need rather than what we want';

> 'Deliberately choosing less when one can have more – in other words, denying the addiction';

> 'Understanding that prosperity is simply having enough to meet your own needs and then being able to meet the needs of others';

Several things were noticeable concerning this notion of frugality. The first was that it comes out of a place of relative affluence: so it is being expressed by people, many of whom would have the option of living a higher standard of living if they chose so to do. We saw right at the start of this paper that the Breathe respondents are slightly above average financially: not predominantly wealthy by any means, but they do not represent a group of people living on the bread line. Simple living is thus a choice when, as the one respondent above said, 'one can have more'.

Secondly, frugality is thus seen as a middle ground between affluence and poverty. A high number of comments made the differentiation between '*needs*' and '*wants*'. What is being envisaged here is not a life that denies one's needs in the tradition of the Desert Fathers and Mothers, but neither is it a life that seeks to go beyond what is necessary materially (recognising the inevitable debate involved in that and the many issues that statement raises). The word '*enough*' was used regularly (eg. 'realising when we have enough') as a way of expressing the opinion that there are needs that are to be met (someone expressed it as, 'only buying stuff that is essential to a full life'), but also a financial/material ceiling. This was expressed most fully by the comment, 'having the right amount of things, so that your money and possessions help

you to have time for others, rather than having too little and spend all your time trying to make ends meet, or having too much and spend all your time up-dating and maintaining your stuff and your life style'. This discussion is something that we will come back to repeatedly through the research, forming – as it does – a dominant note.

Thirdly, whilst acknowledging that this sort of frugal living is about material reduction and limitation, the respondents were overwhelmingly positive about how they viewed this restriction. We shall return later to why this might be. For now it is enough to register this positive sentiment. So some comments people made were,

> 'having what you need and being thankful for it, rather than buying everything in sight and still not being satisfied';

> 'being content with having just enough or doing without to benefit others… Enjoying being rather than getting';

> 'to be content with what I have, to share what I have, to be thankful for what I have'.

When participants were asked to go deeper in the interviews it became clear that the concept of sacrifice is very much part of how they view the frugality of simple living. But their immediate response is a positive one.

Fourthly, the respondents' views around frugality are very much set against the backdrop of the prevailing culture of consumerism. People made comments such as,

> 'being less tied up in consumerism with healthier relationships';

> 'curbing one's desire to consume. Enjoying the richer life with less';

> 'it's so easy to be led astray by glossy adverts and catalogues – no!';

Because of this it was noticeable that many comments carried a distinctly oppositional tone and operated within a 'not this, but that' framework of thought. Again, the distinction was regularly made between *needs* and *wants* (e.g. 'trying to live with what you need, rather than what you want'; 'I think simple living is purchasing and consuming only what you need rather than what you desire'). This was framed within a very specific understanding of consumerism, that equated consumerism negatively with the concept of *wants*. Consumerism was associated with '*things*' and '*stuff*', and

26

this was contrasted with what was viewed as bringing real satisfaction in life. So, some comments that respondents made were:

> 'by slowing down our pace of life and appreciating things that we already have, we can realise that we don't need more. Indeed, more things can lead to less satisfaction in life, and so much time and energy is wasted in chasing after more things',

> 'recognising that pursuit of things does not bring happiness but in savouring and sharing what we have will bring a real sense of well being';

> 'finding contentment and fulfilment in things that cannot be evaluated in financial terms – nature, beauty, creativity, relationships etc. Being satisfied with less materially but rich emotionally, relationally, mentally and spiritually';

True happiness is seen as being bound up in two things: relationships and time. Good relationships were central to much of what people were saying: good relationships with other people (as many of the comments above have already amply demonstrated), but also with God/Jesus and the wider created world. For example, people talked about, 'not consumed by the things around us but keeping our eyes above on Jesus', and, 'putting Jesus at the centre of our lives and being content with all the free riches that are available to us.' In relation to the earth, they commented, 'trying to enjoy simple things like relationships and nature and peace', and, 'working together with people and the earth to take what you need but, in that, giving back what can be given back'.

Not surprisingly, in view of the other responses, there were many comments that brought this tripartite understanding of relationships together, e.g.:

> 'living as if all life matters. Living intentionally. Living with restored relationships – with God, people and the planet first';

> 'seeking to live in a more just and connected way with those around me and in the world. Living without or in restraint so as to be content with what I have and celebrate the more important things of life like relationships, God, creation';

> 'living simply/sustainably so that others can simply live. Just, fair, sustainable, focusing on the essentials, relationships among people and places and God'.

Despite the above, we must be careful to note that the main emphasis on relationships was on people, rather than on God or the earth, yet this holistic understanding was still very present.

Running alongside this came a deep awareness of the damage that our 'love of stuff' has done, not only to ourselves, but to other people and to the earth. It was seen that one's relationship with people reaches out beyond one's immediate neighbour to the person living thousands of miles away, picking our tea, making our computer, battling rising sea levels and so on, and that one's relationship with the earth has to be worked out similarly, both locally and further afield.

The overwhelming sentiment in regards to this awareness was to do with *fairness* and *justice*:

> 'basically living in a way that is more fair, not consuming at the expense of others… (and if you did that hard-core you would live a very different and simple life indeed);
>
> 'being aware of the impact your lifestyle has on the lives of others, how your choices impact upon others, and upon the world; it means learning … the rewards of placing the needs of others before your own desires';

Simple living is thus seen as a vital way of responding to the negative impact that the lifestyles of people in the economically wealthier countries have on other people and places.

Whilst the major focus was on relationships, time was also of concern to people (since time is essential for good relationships to be developed, as highlighted in response to questions eleven and twelve). One person talked about simple living in terms of, 'having time, not just making time for God and others', and another talked about, 'slowing life down. Not racing after the next best thing. Being present in the here and now, not distracted by want.' Another person put it in terms of, 'challenging us to reduce and step away from the media noise that fills our heads and lives and bring the still, quiet, peace to be able to breathe again and make informed and considered decisions instead of rushed and badly influenced decisions'.

Earlier, we noted the participants' positive view of the restrictions of living a simple life. Looking at the responses to this question, there are several reasons for that. The first, as we have been exploring, is that they recognise the clear benefits that come from living this type of life. What they perceive as being the negatives of consumer culture (typified in the concepts of *things* and *stuff*) are over-ridden by the positives that accrue from living more simply: the positives particularly of enhanced relationships, an ability to respond to the problems of injustice in the world, and a greater sense of time, space and rhythm.[17]

Secondly, it is seen as an essential part of Christian discipleship: an outworking of their faith. This was best expressed by the person who said, 'simple living is loving God'. It was also demonstrated by the natural way they talked frequently about God or Jesus. All manner of phrases were used such as, '...not consumed by the things around us but keeping our eyes above on Jesus'; '...listening to God more for guidance about spending and living'; '...a style of life which brings calm, common sense & a touch of God'; 'God knows what I need, so all I truly need to think about is him'; '...aiming for God and His will for my life'; 'I trust that the Lord will provide in all circumstances!'; 'putting Jesus at the centre of our lives... and tuning in to God's heart for the wants of others'; '...focusing our whole lives around God and getting rid of everything else'. Undoubtedly, for the participants of this questionnaire, living a simple life is bound up with their Christian faith: it is not separate from, or irrelevant to, it.

The third reason why I believe participants view simplicity in such a positive light is the very basic reason that it is a choice (reflecting what we saw earlier on them coming from a position of relative affluence). On going through the responses, I was intrigued to note that comment after comment used active language. So, people talked about, 'considering carefully'; 'a deliberate decision'; 'consciously trying to find'; 'being thoughtful, ethical and purposeful'; 'being aware'; 'choosing'; 'trying to resist'; 'focusing on'; 'actively seeking'; 'taking a sober look'; 'thinking about why you are doing things', 'make informed and considered decisions', 'stop and think', 'a conscious decision'... and more.

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[17] Although these were the main emphases of the responses, a greater appreciation of beauty and creativity was also mentioned by some.

The picture of simple living that emerges from this question, therefore, is of a deliberately chosen way of life that limits the amount of material things that are acquired in order to focus on other things that are seen to be of more value; and that it is a way of life that arises from a strongly held Christian faith.

14. Please identify which of the following statements most explain why you want to live your life more simply
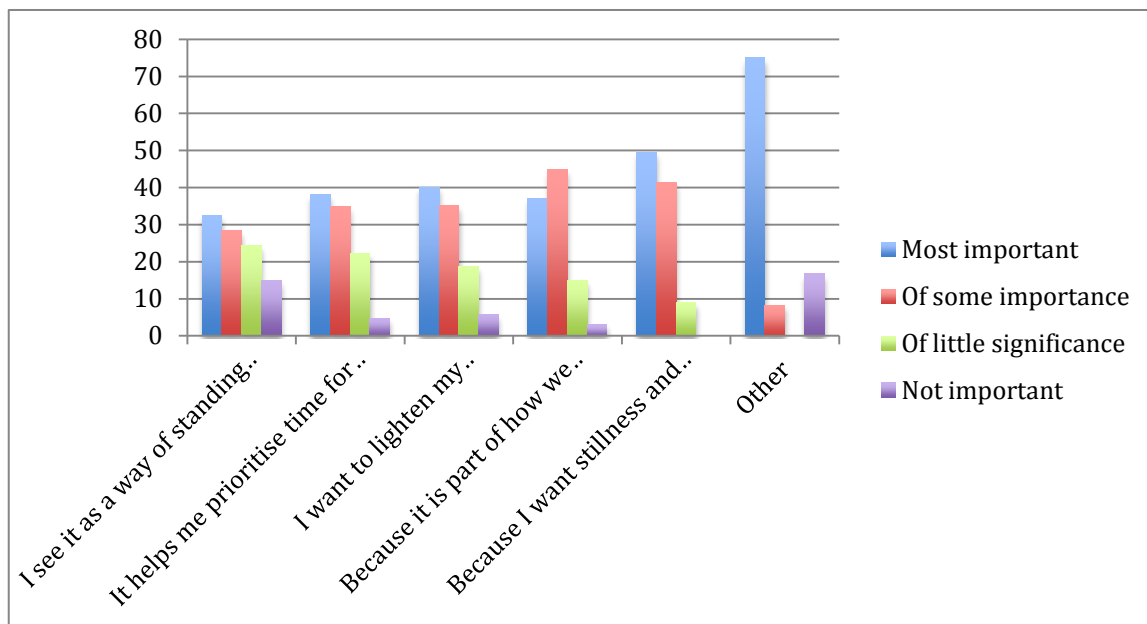
Question fourteen was a question that both failed and succeeded. Forced ranking was introduced in order to identify if people related simplicity with one statement more than another. However, I produced more statements than there were ranking choices and so it was not possible to complete the question properly. At the same time, inadvertently, the question succeeded because, in the comments section, people complained about the question, saying, for example, 'statements 2,3,4 and 5 are all very important to me – it wouldn't let me select more than one at a time!', and, 'this survey did not let me tick all the items I wanted to – it was set up to rank the answers which is not what you asked. All these things are important to me', thus highlighting the holistic nature of participants' understanding of simplicity.

The flaws in this question are fully recognised. Nonetheless, the results remain interesting even as they are. Reflecting the comments above, each statement was seen

as important by more than 60% of respondents. If we add 'most important' and 'of some importance' together, we get these results:
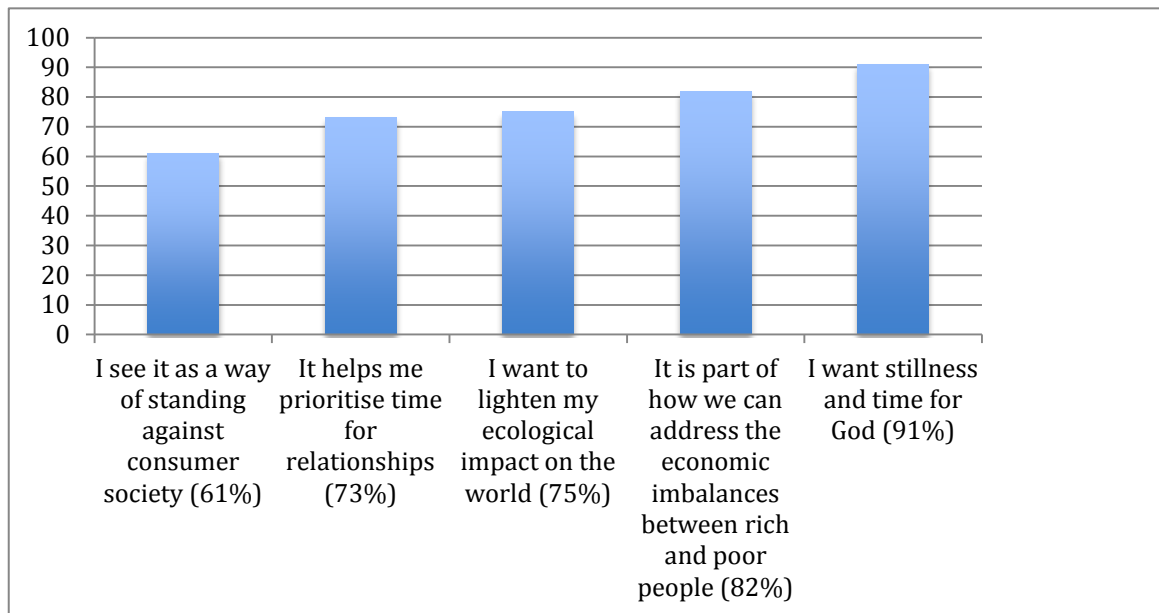
On first site, the results for Question 14 seemed to contradict some of the earlier results that we have seen. For example, in our analysis of the previous question, time for relationships has come through more strongly than concerns about ecological impact. However, on closer inspection, and in particular in comparison with the results of Question 11, there is a very close synergy. Whilst not identical, the percentages for each of these statements bears a remarkable similarity to their equivalent statements in Question 11, the glaring exception being the statement on relationships (which is a weakness in my choice of statements for Question 11).

If we put the various statements together, we can see the similarities:

A bar chart with a vertical scale from 0 to 100 (in increments of 10). Each of the five categories shows a blue bar (left) and a red bar (right):

- A way of standing against consumer society (61%) / Average percentage of responses to Question 11 (56%) — blue ~61, red ~56
- It helps me prioritise time for relationships (73%) / No equivalent option in Question 11 — blue ~73, no red
- I want to lighten my ecological impact on the world (75%) / It is using the earth's resources too quickly (71%) — blue ~75, red ~71
- It is part of how we can address economic imbalances (82%) / It is using the earth's resources unfairly (81%) — blue ~82, red ~81
- I want stillness and time for God (91%) /It squeezes out space for God (71%) — blue ~91, red ~71

This is confirmation of the conclusions that we have been reaching through this questionnaire.

When we turn to see what people wrote under 'other', of the twenty-seven responses given, thirteen (50%) of them were commenting on not being able to complete the question properly. The others served, again, to confirm what was already there, rather than introduce anything new. So, one person said, 'doing God's will – listening to Him rather than everyone else about how I live my life out, before Him and others'. Someone else said, 'I want the real me back', and another person, 'I want more balance in my life, more time, less pressure, more justice in my living'. The overall feeling was summed up by, 'because God didn't make us for "things", but to be creative relational beings!'.

15. What first inspired you to begin thinking about living more simply?
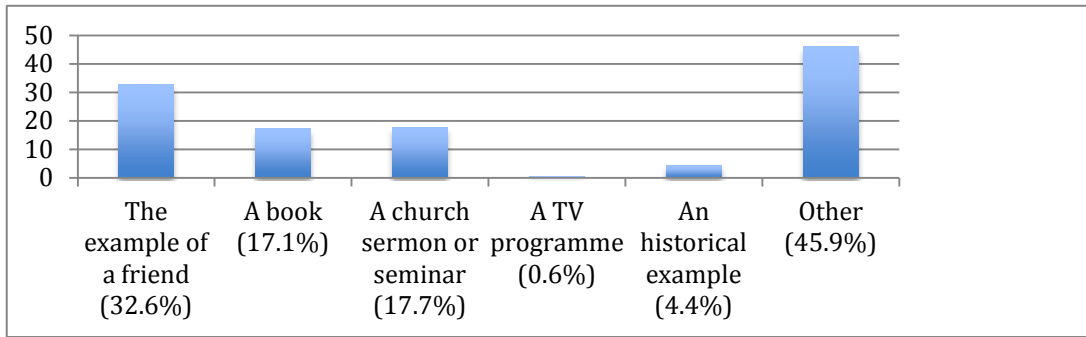
The answers to this question indicate a broad range of routes that first drew people towards living simply. Nothing comes through as having been particularly formative (although the example of a friend is clearly most important). When we look at the specifications that people have given, again there are a wide diversity of answers. The two things that most stand out are people talking about a particular experience abroad that first opened their eyes to poverty and/or injustice, and/or to the positive nature of living without a huge amount of stuff, and some aspect of the Bible, theology or Jesus' life (both those two areas were mentioned by 13% of those who specified). As regards particular people, Shane Claibourne, Richard Foster and Ron Sider were mentioned the most (but only by 9%, 6% and 4% respectively of those who specified). The example of monasticism was mentioned by 6%.

16. What things have you done to try to live more simply?
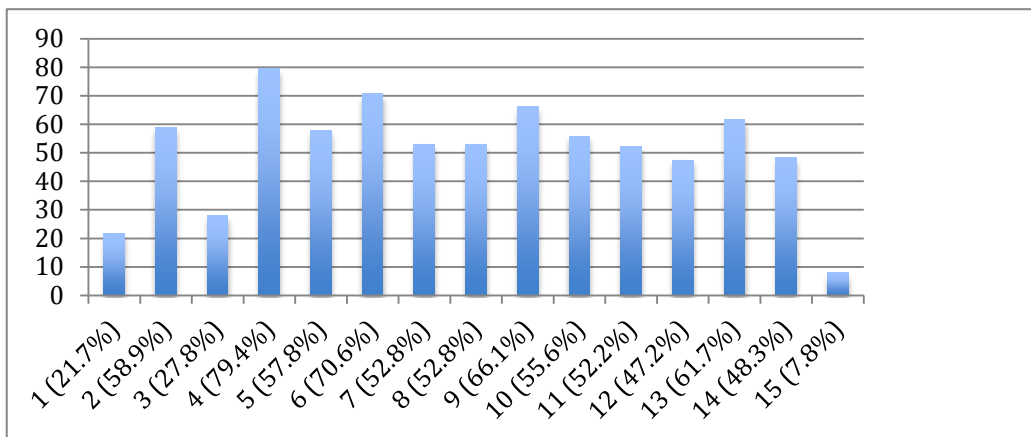
1. Earn a lower salary
2. Give more money away
3. Live with others/invite others to live with you

4. Own less things/give things away regularly
5. Share possessions with others
6. Reduce the amount of clothes you buy
7. Reduce your car and air travel
8. Grow your own produce/make your own things
9. Support local businesses
10. Become involved in your community
11. Consciously make time for friends
12. Give time to helping those more needy than you
13. Find ways to lower your ecological footprint
14. Set aside regular time for spiritual engagement
15. Other

Not surprisingly, given the emphasis of Question 13, the activity that most amount of respondents have engaged in is owning less things and giving things away regularly, and the second highest activity was reducing the amount of clothes owned. Of the fourteen specified actions, only four scored below a 50% response rate, thus indicating a fairly active and engaged group of people (although perhaps not as active as expected?).

Other actions that people have taken are to use the library, 'encourage other Christians to take more seriously the call to be stewards of creation', change career, budget more carefully, 'talk to the kids about generosity', share meals with others and 'learn the basic skills needed for living with less technology'. There was not anything else that was not covered in the main options.

17. What resources have you drawn on to encourage you along the way?
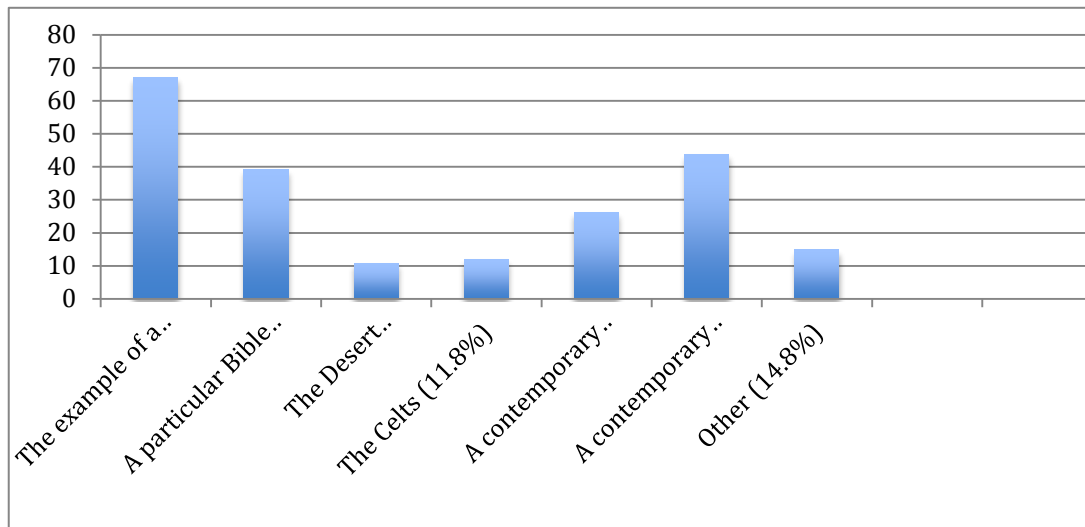
Question 17 was similar to Question 15 in demonstrating a broad range of places that people go to in order to be sustained on their journey with simplicity. The two key sources of encouragement come from the example of friends (67%) and contemporary writers or groups (70%). A variety of writers and groups were mentioned, with Shane Claibourne and some sort of monasticism being the most popular.

PART II: INTERVIEW ANALYSIS

Over the course of February and March 2011, twelve interviews were conducted with members of Breathe. These interviews gave an opportunity for a more in-depth investigation into areas of interest that arose through the larger-scale questionnaire research. The majority of participants are part of Breathe's official 'supporters': a group of people more closely committed to Breathe than the larger numbers of people only signed up to receive Breathe's emails. Seven of the interviewees were women and five men, representing the gender divide of the questionnaires. The interviews themselves took place in a variety of locations: at the interviewees' place of work; at events at which both the participant/s and myself were, and a few via Skype calls.

The interviews were transcribed (see Appendices) and codes were used to identify the content of the interviews: a coding sequence that inevitably developed as the

interviews were examined. Some twenty-eight codes were specified, which eventually were condensed into four main categories:

1. The foundations for participants' interest in simplicity
2. What they like about Breathe
3. Their understanding of simplicity
4. The personal benefits and the challenges of trying to live more simply

1. Personal Foundations

Towards the beginning of the interviews, participants were asked about their interest in the concept of simplicity and to identify from where that interest arose. Their answers are instructive because, embedded within them, we can see what aspects they consider to be important.

There were two main things that people talked about. Firstly, and overwhelmingly, the responses focussed on the issue of poverty. Ten of the twelve interviewees identified that an interest in simplicity had been both triggered and developed by some sort of experience of poverty, whether that be growing up in an economically underdeveloped country as a child (e.g. Madagascar and Kenya), visiting a poor country as an adult (e.g. Kosovo and Burundi), or working/living amongst the poor in some way (e.g. working as a priest in inner-city London or helping out in a soup kitchen for homeless people whilst at university). The two people who did not mention a specific experience of contact with poverty both stated that their interest in simplicity came from their family backgrounds, one described as 'Christian socialism', the other as 'quite left socialism' (indeed this particular respondent's grandmother was a friend of Kier Hardy's and Mrs Pankhurst's and the grandmother's house was where those individuals stayed when they went up north).

The impact that these various experiences of poverty had on participants can be seen, for example, in the statement from **B**, who was brought up in Madagascar and talked about, ' just being very aware from a very early age of the inequalities of the world and just how privileged we are to have what we have', and **E**, who worked with a London-based charity:

I saw some of the greatest need just round the corner from some of the greatest wealth in London, and so that made me really aware of the differences in wealth and the differences in lifestyles and actually how you can impact people's lives directly by living more simply and actually not buying more stuff but giving stuff away, or helping someone to buy something when they don't actually have anything rather than buying it for yourself.

And I think that linked as well to the passion for environmental stuff that I'd really picked up from Uni and so leaving Besom and working with A Rocha, I kind of carried on, just had a bit more of an awareness of social justice, of urban social justice and the need for simplicity in that

This response chimes with a key finding from the questionnaire analysis: that the most important issue that respondents perceive simplicity as trying to address is the problem of poverty and inequality, particularly (although not exclusively) on a global level. As we saw previously, 82% of those who participated in the questionnaire said they wanted to live more simply because, 'it is part of how we can address the economic imbalances between rich and poor people', and 81% thought that a key problem with consumerism was that, 'it is using up the earth's resources *unfairly*'. The problem of poverty, and the inequality that participants see as being a cause of that poverty, is thus a key concern for people and a fundamental motivator for why they want to live more simply.

The second area that people talked about was some sort of relationship with material things. There was not one consistent angle coming through here, but clearly people saw their relationship with 'stuff' (a word which, as we have seen, serves as a summary for all that participants consider as wrong with the culture they inhabit) as problematic. **C** talked about, 'a gradual increasing discomfort with consumerism, with rampant capitalism', while **J** saw her interest in simplicity as coming, 'from seeing that accumulating lots of stuff doesn't make me happy in the long term, but it's also a real desire, and I have enjoyed being able to be generous with stuff.'

Three people talked about how, as they grew up, they were never that interested in materialism anyway, as typified by **I** who said: 'growing up as a teenager, in my twenties etc, I've just naturally not particularly been into materialism culture. So I was never one for the brands and all the stuff, just with the friends I had none of us were

really into that, the jobs that I've had with charities, just means that that less materialistic, less extravagant in terms of material stuff, those issues have not particularly grabbed me.' Alongside this, **F** talked about her experience of living with, 'a limited income for quite a few years', which challenged her to look at other ways of living (such as car sharing, cycling, using freecycle etc) and led to her discovery that, 'you don't need to buy everything'.

From the other side, **K** talked about her family background, 'where money and status were very very important and, there was a lot of duplicity involved in that because you always had to almost pretend that you had more or that you had enough, because my family actually ended up losing all their money, which was all very difficult, but there was this idea that you had to always conceal that.'

2. The Benefits that Participants Accrue from Breathe

Two words can describe the main roles that Breathe plays in people's lives: encouragement and stimulation. Breathe encourages people because it brings like-minded people together around a nexus of issues that are not considered mainstream. This statement from **F** encapsulated this: 'I just like the fact that I'm not doing it on my own'.

What became apparent from people's comments was that trying to live a simpler kind of life can be lonely and look odd to others, because it is so far from the norm. These three comments in particular summarised this sentiment:

> **I**: 'in the encouragement stakes, yes, because it is isolating and depressing to think, 'am I the only person in New Frontiers who thinks about this stuff?', and then obviously meeting Phil was like, 'yay, there's light elsewhere, there's two of us!'. There was definitely that kind of, 'phew, it's not just me, I'm not an idiot'.
>
> **A**: 'it's kind of like self-affirming: you know, we're not completely on our own with this; we're not the kind of mad ones, because there are other people.'
>
> **B**: 'when you get together, because it can be quite a lonely [laughs], a lonely way to live sometimes: you are different from your friends, so to meet with other people who are very much thinking the same things and who are passionate about the same stuff, it's just a really encouraging group to be part of.'

In that role of encourager, Breathe was seen as speaking into something with which the Church does not generally concern itself. As **B** said, 'I think there are really important things like consumerism and so on that the church doesn't really talk about enough, and so to be part of something that is kind of speaking, I think, quite prophetically into those sorts of issues, is nice'. **B** continued, 'I'm interested in simple living and those sorts of issues and they're probably the only group I'd come across who were distinctively Christian'.

Breathe acts as a stimulation through its emails, which prompt people to give attention to their lives and how they may (or may not) be living more simply. The comments demonstrate a sense of solidarity and relationship, counteracting the loneliness expressed above and extending that initial point of Breathe being an encourager. Respondent **L** talked about a phrase suggested to him by Bishop Graham Cray: 'a court of reputation', which acts as 'a different set of people to compare ourselves to'. In the next chapter we will consider the notion of consumerism as emulation: the 'keeping up with the Joneses' perspective that sees our consumer habits as driven by a desire to copy those around us. Breathe gives its supporters a different type of 'Jones' to keep up with - a 'Jones' who is further down the simplicity road than others – and interview participants found that helpful. To quote **A**, they found that they were, 'personally challenged by what other people are doing that are ahead of us, or we haven't thought of before, or just continue to keep thinking about it because it's very easy: you know, you're married with kids and family, that these things can slip and, it helps me by regularly Breathe comes into my inbox.'

This is crucial in helping people negotiate their differences from broader culture. Tanner highlights that all taken-for-granted ideas are historically conditioned and thereby able to be changed by the presence of alternatives.[18] By being in regular contact with others who are also trying to live out those alternatives, the 'taken-for-granted' ideas of consumer culture assume less of a hegemonic status and thereby appear easier to challenge.

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[18] K. Tanner, 'Economies of Grace', in W. Schweiker and C. Mathewes (Eds.), *Having: Property and Possession in Religious and Social Life*, 354.

Bearing in mind these two points of encouragement and stimulation, it was interesting to note particular words that interview participants used of Breathe: 'informal', 'laid-back', 'not too heavy'; 'a kind of unassuming honesty'; 'real about the struggle but passionate about it'; 'safe', 'non-judgemental'. The sentiments being expressed here are summed up by **B** who said, 'I think through Breathe I've come with all sorts of new ways of talking about it that sound much more positive [laughs] and much more inviting and the kind of thing that you'd want to be part of, rather than sort of a green thing'. Taking into consideration the sentiments above around feeling isolated, it is clearly important to participants that Breathe expresses itself in this gentle way.

3. Key Emphases of Simplicity

There is no definition of simplicity. Elgin identifies ten different names for the sort of life that is being envisaged by those from Breathe who participated in the interviews, and eight different approaches to simplicity that people can take.[19] As we saw in the questionnaires, when asked what they thought simplicity was, we were given a mass of different answers. Nonetheless, as the interview analysis progressed, it became clear that, whilst the weightings might be placed variously, a number of strong themes were held in common.

i. Global social concern

Together with the aforesaid, concern for others on a global scale is one of the prime motivators for seeking to live a simpler life. **F**, talking about her job in a global children's charity described how, 'I was asked to do quite a lot of talks around children's issues, child's rights, a biblical basis for advocacy on children's issues. And then you inevitably go into issues about justice and that inevitably leads to issues about lifestyle, and as a result of that (researching those talks and then presenting them) you feel you can't present a challenge to people in churches and conferences if you're not actually doing it yourself.' **C** expressed it thus: 'the simpler living is a, I don't want to say by-product, but it is a natural response to, if you're passionate about the plight of others and particularly in relation to the poor and oppressed, then it's almost impossible to pursue that without looking at your own life'.

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[19] Elgin, *Voluntary Simplicity*, 12-17.

With this comes a strong articulation of issues of fairness and justice. As **F** expressed it,

> I think it is about a sense of inherent inequality and injustice. And I have a real passion about justice… and actually it's that sense in which, if we can try and do something, however small, in our context, it can make a difference. Because, I think for me what I've realised more and more, is that we're in a global world, we're in a global church, we're in a global community, and what we do here has repercussions for so many other people. And if I can make decisions here that are going to benefit rather than harm, then I will try to do that.

Embedded within this sense of inequality is a keen belief that the amount of material goods owned by those in the more economically developed countries is directly and inversely proportional to the amount owned by poorer people. **L** summed it up: 'I think there was a very clear mandate in the early simplicity stuff, "live more simply that others may simply live". You know, we've got too much stuff and if we had less stuff other people would have more stuff.' This oppositional framework of 'stuff verses people' is something that we noted previously in the questionnaire analysis, and will be commented on more fully in later chapters.

There is, then, a keen sense of global connectedness that arises from the interviews: the feeling that what a person does here directly benefits or harms others living around the world. That connection is perceived as being both a direct connection (through the purchasing of products made, reared, grown, mined, assembled etc by another person is another country: as **I** said, 'the way we live in this country has an impact on people all over the world: the obvious stuff like Fair Trade. That's a no-brainer for me: we can buy things, we need to buy things here, we buy food, and how can we buy food that we know has been produced under terrible conditions where people aren't paid properly?'), and as an indirect connection through a general over-consumption which then creates negative conditions for others living elsewhere. The question of how one is to live and consume in a positive way in today's world is thus one of the key issues facing participants.

This sense of connection links with both Miller's and Cavanaugh's writings on consumerism (pre-empting a fuller discussion on consumerism in Chapter Three),

both of whom draw on the understanding of consumerism as commodification, deriving from Marxist thought and the work of Polanyi in highlighting the commodification of labour, land and money.[20] Miller traces the development of Western society from production to consumption. As society became more globalised and advertising encouraged goods to be purchased from all over the world, consumers lost touch with the origins of those products. The result was that, 'the commodity appears naked in the marketplace, shorn of all the communal references that would give it meaning'.[21] Miller locates this commodification within broader societal moves that have led to the development of the single-family home and the need for those homes to rely on a whole range of electrical appliances that replace the work that would traditionally have been done by the extended family, thus resulting in mass de-skilling.[22] The consequence is that, 'our countless acts of consumption and evaluation of commodities large and small train us daily to value things *out of their contexts'*.[23]

Cavanaugh talks about this central aspect of consumerism in terms of detachment: 'people do not hoard money; they spend it. People do not cling to things; they discard them and buy other things'.[24] He looks at how consumerism leads to people becoming detached from material production (ie we do not make things anymore), producers (we do not know who has made our products) and the actual products themselves (we discard, move onto the new, so quickly).[25]

Hauerwas summarises this as, 'capitalism has no memory'.[26] Amnesia becomes an important feature of consumerism as, following Cavanaugh's delineation above, we forget how to make things, who has made them, and what we bought them for in the first place. And, we forget the time that has gone into so much of what we consume:

[20] K. Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: the political and economic origins of our time*, chapters 6, 14 – 16.

[21] V. Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture*, 37-38 (italics mine).

[22] Miller, *Consuming Religion*, 46-47.

[23] Miller, *Consuming Religion*, 71.

[24] William T. Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2008). 34.

[25] Ibid. 36-47.

[26] S. Hauerwas, *A Better Hope: Resources for a Church Confronting Capitalism, Democracy, and Postmodernity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2000, 148), cited in, M. Northcott, 'Being Silent: Time in the Spirit', in, S. Hauerwas and S. Wells, *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, 418.

the years the tree has grown before it is cut down for paper and wood; the slow passing of millions of years that have produced the (literally) fossil fuels that are burnt with such speed. However, the interviewees demonstrated a keen awareness of, and desire for, what Cavanaugh would call 'attachment' and Miller 'engagement': essential components in learning how to live and consume well in our current culture.[27]

ii. Ecological Concern

Following on from the dominant theme of notions of fairness and inequality, participants were also quick to identify an ecological emphasis to their understanding of simplicity. Apart from one person, whose thinking was solely focussed on community (a theme to which we will return), every person brought an ecological dynamic into their interview somewhere (and often throughout). There was without doubt a definite spectrum of interest in this issue, ranging from **J** who said, 'I don't have a default position to think about sustainability issues and the earth ... but I certainly share a great desire to do my bit and to be responsible in that', to **I** who said in some surprise at the end of their interview, 'I haven't really talked about the earth/environment stuff so much because that just goes as read to me: it's so obvious I've hardly even talked about it!'

Not surprisingly, considering earlier findings, participants' ecological interest was never something that stood on its own, but was always expressed in a manner that connected it with the aforementioned concern for social justice, and with their relationship with God (to which we will return). Respondent **E** described how studying environmental ethics at university came together with being challenged by justice issues and then studying theology, with the result that he became, 'really aware of the need to try and focus on living within our means and not just treating the planet as if we can take everything we want right now.' **H** expressed simplicity as, 'living righteously in a really broad way, so living in right relationship with God and with other people and with the earth. Because if we're actually seeking to do that we will, as a result, live simply because we'll be aware of what the limitations are and a good way to live', a sentiment reflected in other people's comments as well.

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[27] Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed*, 57, and Miller, *Consuming Religion*, 184.

As with the questionnaire analysis, so too here we see expressed a holistic framework to which has been given the name 'simplicity': a framework that encompasses relationship with God, relationship with other people and relationship with the wider creation. Within a modern Christian context, this three-fold emphasis has only recently been embraced, but within the broader simplicity movement as a whole, the combination of the spiritual with the social and the ecological is commonplace.[28]

One of the ways by which this nexus of ideas around social justice, equity, global connection and ecological concern is formulated is by the use of the concept of generosity. Every single participant used the word generosity at some point in their interview in relation to how they were trying to live. For example, **I**: 'the more simply you live in your own life then the more time and money etc you have to give away and help the social justice agenda overseas.' More holistically, it was expressed in this way by **B**: 'I don't know how to say it in a single word, but there's a sense of doing no harm, living a life that encourages other things to flourish, whether that's the patch of land at the back of my house and bird boxes that I put up, but something that is, well it is generous I suppose, and generous to nature as well as to people.'

iii. Reduction of expenditure and consumption

How does that generosity outwork itself? Partly it is expressed explicitly through people actively looking for ways to be generous with what they have got. So, **A** talked about how, as a family, they began to think about various aspects of their life, in particular their giving, wanting to be, 'increasing in our generosity', and **K** talked about opening up their home to have someone else living with them and sharing 'storecupboard stuff and things like that'. However, I think it is mostly expressed implicitly, by an emphasis on simplicity being concerned with the reduction of consumption and expenditure (encapsulated in the questionnaire analysis by the term 'frugality'): people see their willingness to impose limits on their lifestyle as a crucial part of how they are generous towards other people and nature.

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[28] As a read through of Elgin's, *Voluntary Simplicity*, and any cursory look at the classic *Resurgence* magazine amply demonstrates. These themes are also the dominant ones highlighted in the overview of the US Voluntary Simplicity movement by Grigsby in chapter 2 of, *Buying Time*. There is a difference over the approach taken towards paid employment, a point which will be highlighted later.

This is not to say that there was no sense in which the limiting of consumption was seen as a good in and of itself. **A**, for example, talked about having a, '"one in one out" policy: if you buy something in you have to pass something out, so that we're not on an ever-increasing store of stuff', and **C** said that her motivation for limiting the amount of material goods she had around her was simply about, 'this is what we're called to: as Christians I increasingly … feel how can we be true followers of Christ unless we divest ourselves of more of this sort of need for stuff and comfort?'

For most participants, though, the reduction of expenditure and consumption had a clear purpose behind it: 'you can impact people's lives directly by living more simply and actually not buying more stuff but giving stuff away, or helping someone to buy something when they don't actually have anything, rather than buying it for yourself' (**E**).

E went on to express it well and is worth quoting in full:

> It's a less cluttered life because the clutter gets in the way of the important things. So, it's still a very intentional life, because it's choosing to say 'no' to a lot of things because of having a goal in mind, which is not just the lack of clutter, but actually the goal of being able to know God better and being able to worship him better and in those things, right in the heart of those, is caring for ourselves and the whole of the creation around us, which includes other people. So I guess that the goal is actually a God-focussed goal, but in order to have that space and frame of mind to really know God in that way, we need to say no to all the clutter, and say yes to the simple things.

A central component of simplicity, then, is that it involves reducing one's expenditure and consumption. This was often expressed in the term 'enough': sometimes negatively (as seen in **H**'s criticism of consumerism as generating, 'the continual striving of, "you're never enough, you need the next car and next house and then you're spending all this money and all your time getting the money and on that treadmill"'), but more often positively, as in, 'simplicity is living with enough' (**D**), and, 'simplicity is about living according to what you need rather than what you want' (**G**).

iv. Attitude towards material goods

It was noticeable, though, that there was little attempt to define more closely what 'enough' might be, or what our needs are as opposed to our wants.[29] This is a salient issue for those wanting to live more simply and partly concerns how participants relate to money and possessions.

On the one hand, as we have seen, the interviewees are intentional about standing against society's urges to consume more and more, placing a heavy weight on, what **C** described as, 'that lessening of an appetite to just constantly feed the need to have stuff'. Contrasts were made between themselves and friends, family members or work colleagues who demonstrated practices that were more consumptive than theirs. One person talked about, 'curbing my desire to consume lots of stuff' (**J**), and another talked about becoming, 'increasingly uncomfortable about possessions and having more than I needed' (**C**), and, within that, learning to have less, need less and desire less.

On the other hand, one gains the impression that a more faithful description of participants' relationship with money and possessions lies in Mary Grigsby's insightful comment that simplicity offers, 'enough and a little bit extra'.[30] Quite clearly, on a global level, the interviewees have more than only the things necessary for daily subsistence, and have things that they want as well as need. Is this necessarily wrong? As we will see when we look at what interviewees perceive to be the benefits of simplicity, there is a robust emphasis in the interviews on the positives of life. **D** said that, 'simplicity is living with enough, but also knowing abundance', and participants used words like, 'joyful', 'goodness', 'gratitude', 'rich', 'freedom', and 'grace'. A number of participants mentioned the Desert Fathers and the monastic tradition as being veins of Christian life that they drew on for inspiration, thus evidencing that the deep tradition of Christian asceticism, with its renunciation of worldly goods and its disciplined training, is something that influences understandings of simplicity. Nonetheless, as **G** said, 'I don't think you necessarily have to live in poverty to live simply'.

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[29] That, no doubt, was the fault of the interview itself and, in hindsight, is a line of enquiry that it would have been beneficial to have pursued.

[30] M. Grigsby, *Buying Time*, 55.

From a Christian perspective, there is rich discussion to be had here around the use of material goods. There is a distinct tension here for our research participants: a tension that will be explored more fully in Chapter Four.

My view is that we are seeing two things at work here. Firstly, we are seeing some rejection of material goods, with an appreciation that they do not ultimately bring satisfaction and, indeed, often hinder growth towards those things deemed to be most important in life. We see this in the constant reiteration throughout the interviews of what can crudely be called the 'stuff verses people' theme (e.g. **L**: 'that's Breathe's line: "less stuff, more life"', and, 'we need to be people who are living lives that speak of actually that we don't value stuff, but we value relationships and we value Jesus'). But, secondly, this is not pursued to the degree that is seen in monastic life (a fuller exploration of which is provided in Chapter Four).

What we are seeing instead – or rather, as well -, is a re-appropriation of material goods; using them in ways that facilitate and enhance people's overall aims in life. Humphery describes this as a 'new materialism', in which there is, 'a valuing of material objects and forms that does not privilege endless consumption'. He draws on the work of Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton who distinguish between '*terminal materialism'* (whereby the 'habit of consumption can become an end in itself, feeding on its autonomous necessity to possess more things, to control more status, to use more energy'), and '*instrumental materialism*' (which involves, 'the cultivation of objects as essential means for discovering and furthering goals', primarily, 'the fuller unfolding of human life').[31] For Humphery, this new way of relating to the material world can provide, 'a common ground of being with and consuming things differently', out of which, 'we may well forge different ways of being with each other'.[32] There are ways by which material goods can be used positively to facilitate life and relationship, and the interviews show Breathe members as wanting to explore this dynamic alongside the restraint. This second approach is encapsulate nicely by Christine Firer Hinze: 'a new ethic of enough will require not an asceticism that glorifies self-denial or

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[31] M. Csikszentmihalyi and E. Rochberg-Halton, *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 230-231, in K. Humphery, *Excess: Anti-Consumerism in the West*, 175.
[32] K. Humphery, *Excess*, 177.

impugnes the bodily, but a joyful and life-affirming engagement in and with the material world'.[33]

v. Ethical consumerism

One of the ways by which we see this outworked in the interviews is through the concept of 'ethical consumerism'. The participants not only focus on reduction of expenditure and consumption as key facets of simplicity, they also deem important how they use the money that they do have, and how they use that money to purchase goods. So **I**:

> 'Like buying Fair Trade: how can you not buy Fairtrade once you're aware of it? How can you choose not to and still be a loving disciple of Christ? So, how can we keep on buying all this stuff that's churning out of factories in China, eating up the world's natural resources, causing climate change, creating poverty or sustaining poverty in sub-Saharan Africa etc etc etc, and still feel that we're loving those communities?'

This focus on ethical consumerism relates well to our previous discussion on re-engagement and connection, and to Humphery's desire above to 'forge different ways of being with each other', as is evidenced by this quote from **H**: 'so say, like some banana plantation: buying bananas from there where all the workers are getting really screwed over and buying local fruit and veg where you've got relationships with the people at the market, … that's a simple way of doing something'. Respondent **H** continued highlighting the positives of this approach on a personal level with this example: **'**say you give up buying new clothes and you only shop at second hand shops, then when you find a real gem in a second-hand shop you're like, 'yes, awesome!', and you're so much happier rather than buying something from Primark which you could just get any day of the week.'

One of the most notable features of the interviews (echoing the questionnaires) was an emphasis on conscious decision-making and choice. **F** was very aware of this: 'for me I think an awful lot of simplicity is about making conscious choices, it's about making conscious decisions to say, "I'm going to try and do things differently, even if there's a cost to that, even if it means I can't have strawberries in December!"'. She

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[33] C. Firer Hinze, 'What is Enough? Catholic Social Thought, Consumption, and Material Sufficiency', in, W. Schweiker and C. Mathewes, *Having*, 188 (f/n 67).

then went on to talk about, 'making a conscious decision to only buy what food I can that's fairtrade and only food in season. You make a decision and then you budget so that you then free up a bit of money that you can then give away.'

We thus see how Breathe members work with the concept of 'enough', as they make the link between this 'new materialism' and a more ascetic approach, holding in tension both a desire to de-accumulate and not permit material goods to distract them from their life goals of relationship with God, others and the wider creation (**H**: 'if we're wanting to obey God then naturally we'll want to discipline ourselves and restrain ourselves and look out for the needs of others') with a positive appreciation of material goods and of how they can be used to work towards fostering relationships of equality (**H**: 'through simplicity we can start to breakdown unjust systems because you're making connections again and building relationships'). It was interesting in this regard to notice that the word, 'anti-consumerism', was only used once throughout the entirety of the interviews.

Such an understanding is important and demonstrates that participants' understanding of consumerism may be more nuanced than first appears through their initial oppositional approach. When consumerism is considered more fully in Chapter Three, it will be seen that the bleak, anti-relationship view of consumerism can be counteracted by a softer approach.

vi. Interest in local community

Earlier we noted a sense of connection held by the interviewees with others, particularly on a global level, often stimulated through time spent overseas, particularly in childhood. This solidarity has a more local emphasis in the interviews as well, and many people linked simplicity with community. This was put neatly by **B,** who described the development of their understanding of simplicity as, 'an appreciation of it going from being about personal choices to being about a way of life that involves other people'. For **K**, particularly, simplicity was entirely concentrated on building community. Her interview was focussed on what she and her husband were doing to foster that: having people living with them, putting a lot of energy into

their community-focussed church, having people (including strangers) round for meals and the such like.

As we keep discovering, simplicity for members of Breathe is not just an individual pursuit related to the reduction of expenditure and consumption and the practice of ethical consumerism. These things are core, but the motivation remains the development of relationship and community (**J**: 'what have I gained from aspiring to live simply? I think I've gained some real relationships and some deep relationships with other people that are on that journey'). There is a strong sense coming through from participants that consumerism stands against the formation of strong relationships, focussed as it is on the creation of ersatz communities located around the accumulation of 'stuff'. Humphery, in his broad-ranging review of anti-consumerist movements in the West, has much that is positive to say about those engaged in what he calls, 'a life politics' (i.e. those individuals who 'enact fundamental lifestyle change'[34]). However, one of his criticisms is essentially that an ideology of individualism cannot be fought against or resisted through an individualistic response.[35] What is needed are 'communities of engagement': people who come together, yes, to consider their individual actions, but also to support one another, imagine and enact fresh ways of living, and stand together to fight the systemic injustices of our society. The inclusion of community for at least some of the participants shows that Humphery's criticism might not be entirely justified - or at least that the version of 'life politics' exhibited by Breathe members extends beyond the purely individualistic.

vii. Time

Leading on from this, and away from issues of money and possessions, is an emphasis on time ('stuff and time I suppose are the two big things', said **C**), reflecting the questionnaire analysis in which 75% of respondents thought that one of the main problems with consumerism was a busy and pressured society. The interviewees' understanding of the links between simplicity and relationships extends also to time. To quote **F**: 'when you live a life that's simple you free up more time for God, for other

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[34] K. Humphery, *Excess: Anti-consumerism in the West*, 50.
[35] K. Humphery, *Excess*, 67-68.

people. You do have time to build relationships which you don't have time for otherwise'. Coming out of the interviews is a deep desire for, 'that sense of a simplicity of inner self that provides a stillness' (**L**), and, 'a less busy life, it's more of a holistic, a life lived out of rest, the Sabbath rest being right in there' (**E**).

This desire comes from a problematic experience of everyday life, one that Michael Northcott sums up well: 'time in the modern world seems to be in short supply. In many households, the daily round of childcare, work and travel to work, meal preparation, and household management involves a constant struggle with time where there never seems to be enough of it'.[36] This experience was echoed in the interviews with Breathe members, who talked about life being, 'complicated and hurried and full of the unhelpful bits and pieces' (**I**), and of needing to, 'break free of this manic pace of life that we seem to get caught in' (**C**). **B** reflected on when he lived in London, that there was a, 'need to be busy', and that time, 'was very much a status symbol, that if you were busy all the time and you had no time to see people then you were obviously a more important person than your friends'.

Because of this context, interview participants were keen to find ways of bringing this dynamic into their understandings of what simplicity is. As **C** put it, 'if I was really able to be living a simpler life, it wouldn't be escaping to the country, but it would be, yes, it's a lot about time, it's about actually having time for people, having time for God, having time for me, having time for thinking and considering'. Again, this comes out of a desire to counteract the perceived individualism of consumer culture in order to enhance relationships:

> With simplicity, if you make your life slightly less cluttered, you get the benefit of having relationships but you also have a bit more time and space. So by me not watching telly and not being 24-7 connected through a phone (I don't have a phone that has internet on it), I can spend time praying, I can be conscious about, "I am going to fast, I am going to pray, I am going to review my giving, I am going to spend time worshipping": I am going to spend time doing those things that, I think, if life gets really full and really cluttered you don't have time for. (**F**)

viii. Activism

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[36] M. Northcott, 'Being Silent: Time in the Spirit', in, S. Hauerwas and S. Wells, *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, 414.

Another key emphasis on simplicity that arises from the interviews is quite simply the activist nature of the participants' understanding. This has already been emphasised (the stress on ethical consumerism, the deliberate nature of participants' actions, the keen sense that simplicity is predominantly a means to an end, and so on), but is worth noting specifically. There is little sense that simplicity is about withdrawing from everyday life in quiet contemplation: rather, simplicity is a means of actively engaging with the problems that are seen to be in the world. This may well be a reflection of the ecclesiological context within which our research participants stand, a fuller discussion of the implications of which is undertaken in Chapter Four. In advance of that, though, we can note here that they come from an overwhelmingly Evangelical background, suggesting that they are conforming to one of Bebbington's 'marks of Evangelicalism': that of *activism*.[37]

Breathe members contrast strongly with Grigsby's 'simple livers' in their attitude to work. Grigsby's research participants are heavily influenced by the work of Dominguez and Robin, in particular their classic book, *Your Money or Your Life: Transforming Your Relationship With Money and Achieving Financial Independence*. In this book waged work is portrayed as essentially a negative thing, and one of the key goals is to get out of it as soon as possible. Thus they advocate that people work and save until they are in a position to live comfortably on the income from their investments, at which point they should leave their waged work, freeing them up for more meaningful activity.[38] Whilst having some value, there is also a danger that this can become essentially narcissistic if, instead of having a broader focus, the 'meaningful activity' is all focussed on the self (e.g. meditation, gardening, dog-walking etc).

By contrast, many of the interviewees from Breathe are involved in waged work that they feel is entirely consonant with their values of simplicity. One person works for an international children's charity; another for a relief and development agency; one is a teacher; another a vicar or church leader; someone works for a Bible organisation, someone else for a conservation charity, and so on. All of these people view their work

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[37] D. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A history from the 1730s to the 1980s*, 3.
[38] M. Grigsby, *Buying Time*, 40.

positively, as actively contributing to, rather than detracting from, their goals. No doubt, again, this is in large part due to their Evangelical heritage, which has traditionally had a robust view of work as God-given.[39]

However, we must highlight one area of activism in which interviewees do not appear to be so engaged: the realm of campaigning. We must be careful not to push the evidence too far: Breathe itself was birthed at the Make Poverty History demonstrations in Edinburgh and so it could be said that campaigning on issues of social justice and ecology are part of the DNA of those who constitute Breathe. However, whilst interviewees naturally talked extensively about the different areas of ethical consumerism in which they were involved (with no need for prompting), there was almost no talk of any campaign work.

This is highly redolent of a strong strand of criticism that comes from Humphery and Grigsby, and also – via a different route – from Heath and Potter. One of Humphery's most salient critiques is that an emphasis on individual lifestyle cannot carry the political weight that its proponents imagine it to do and that, on its own, simplicity does not bring about the challenge to consumerist ideology that is hoped for.[40] The result is that, 'the subject on which much Western anti-consumerist commentary becomes frustratingly timid is that of systemic economic and political change, beyond that of attending to the self'.[41] Grigsby, too, notes that her simple livers are silent on the structural issues of class, race and gender and on how those issues shape the ability of individuals to participate in consumer society.[42] As she says, 'I don't believe… that self-change in keeping with the prescriptions of voluntary simplicity will result in an evolutionary shift to an ecological era without major political and economic shifts that will need to be achieved through policies aimed at structural and

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[39] The classic formulation of this is located in Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, which is illustrated in the positive approach to work expounded by John Stott, a leading thinker within modern British Evangelicalism (see, for example, J. Stott, *Issues Facing Christians Today: New perspectives on social and moral dilemmas*, 165-173).
[40] K. Humphery, *Excess*, 67 – 71. This point will be explored further when we look at the interviewees' understandings of consumerism.
[41] K. Humphery, *Excess*, 71.
[42] See chapter 5 in, *Buying Time*.

cultural change as well'.[43] There is thus a tension between micro and macro political engagement: a tension that will be returned to on other occasions through the thesis.

ix. Faith foundations

The final key emphasis of the interviews is their roots in the Christian faith. It is a quite remarkable feature of the interviews that they are peppered throughout with references to God, the Bible, Jesus and their Christian faith in general: the document created on this faith aspect when undertaking the analysis of the interviews was twice as long as any of the other categories. As **A** said, 'it all comes from my relationship with God'. Or, to put it another way, 'for me as a Christian, simplicity is rooted in faith, so that's why I want to live a simple life: it's coming out of my faith in God and my understanding of who he is and how he's created us and who Jesus is and how Jesus lived when he was incarnate' (**E**).

L finished his interview with these words: 'so, what I've been trying to argue I think, is that the basic disciplines of Christianity … should lead naturally to living a simple life.' For Breathe members, simplicity is an essential part of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus: 'my desire to live a simple life as a Christian is rooted in my understanding that it is part of being a disciple'(**I**); 'so if you're discipling someone to be engaging with God's word, to be people of prayer, to be people who share the gospel, all those things, it needs to be there absolutely, as a thread that runs all the way through' (**K**).

People's comments about their faith mirror the themes that have been highlighted so far. Leaving aside the details, they referred frequently to the story of the provision of the manna in Exodus 16 and the request to, 'give us this day our daily bread', in Matthew 6. Participants' understandings of issues around social justice are firmly rooted in the Bible, particularly the Old Testament prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos

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[43] Grigsby, *Buying Time*, 185. Heath and Potter's focus is not on voluntary simplicity as such, but on counter culture in general and how it has failed seriously to challenge the problems of consumer culture. They urge would-be counter cultural rebels to focus instead on working within the system to bring about workable change (J. Heath and A. Potter, *The Rebel Sell: How the Counterculture Became Consumer Culture*, 329. These writers are not lone voices and others talk on a similar theme. Alan Durning, for example, states that, 'voluntary simplicity, or personal restraint, will do little good, however, if it is not wedded to bold political steps that confront the forces advocating consumption' (A. Durning, 'How Much is Enough?', in M. Schut (Ed.), *Simpler Living, Compassionate Life: a Christian perspective*, 98.

and Hosea are mentioned specifically) and, alongside this, an ecological perspective is very much present. Trust in God underlined much of their comments: not only an immediate trust for the things needed daily, but also a security rooted in an eschatological perspective.

Finally, an understanding of sin was also present in the interviews. Not surprisingly, this was related to greed: 'I think that there's something about our sinfulness and our greed that makes us want to acquire lots of stuff. So I think that that is fundamentally a spiritual problem' (**J**). **L** warned of, 'the danger of greed as idolatry'. In Chapter Three we will be considering consumerism more fully but, in anticipation of that, it is worth noting here Heath and Potter's view that a solution to consumerism is impossible to find because, 'the fundamental problems of the consumer society are a direct expression of the competitiveness of human life in all its dimensions.' Their proposals, therefore, aim simply 'to curtail the most serious excesses of this competition [because] any solution that we propose is not going to be radical, in the sense that it will not get at the roots of the problem'.[44] This resonates with the statement made by one interviewee that, 'unless we change the heart we're always going to have this insatiable appetite, which is going to cause environmental problems.'

4. The Personal Benefits and the Challenges of Simplicity

If there is one thing that shines through all the interviews, it is that the attempt to live a more simple life – whilst perceived as a necessary response to society's national and global problems – is not portrayed in terms of duty, but rather as delight. As we have seen already, some of the main words that people used were, 'joyful', 'thoughtful', 'freedom/freeing', 'liberty', 'open', 'space/spaciousness', 'light/ness', 'gratitude', 'authentic/ity', 'creativity', 'footloose', 'enjoyment', 'connected', 'blessed', 'abundant', 'rich', 'deep', 'transformative', and 'contentment'.

Respondents talked about, 'discovering the joy of giving' (**A**); of how, 'simplicity has a beauty about it, that allows the unnoticed to be noticed, and the unexpected to be

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[44]J. Heath and A. Potter, *Rebel Sell: How the Counterculture Became Consumer Culture*, 349-350.

pleasurable' (**A**); of how simplicity, 'is life giving' (**I**), and that, 'it's something that can release beauty and be releasing of joy and laughter' (**H**).

There was a keen sense that reducing the amount of 'stuff' that one has brings a freedom not experienced by those enmeshed in consumer culture. **C**: 'I feel like I've been freed of having to be part of that buying frenzy', and **B**: 'I think it's very freeing to choose what's important to you and then to be able to pursue those things.' Freedom from the need to consume was important to the interviewees, who often emphasised that a reduced focus on consumer goods led to less worry and more gratitude (**K**: 'I think the more you reflect on God's generosity and the more you move into a place of depending on him, and not on what you have already, the less anxiety there is in your life, because I think the more you have the more worries you have').

Alongside this was the repeated theme of 'people verses stuff'. The outcome of 'not being a slave to things', as **I** put it, was a greater ability to build relationships with others, whether through increased generosity or simply through having more time to spend with other people. **J** said that she had, 'gained some real relationships and some deep relationships with other people that are on that journey', and **E** felt that one of the positives of simplicity was that, 'you just become more aware of the simple things and instead of being caught up with shopping and stuff, you're more preoccupied with relationship and enjoyment of space and time-out.'

These positive benefits identified by participants are, of course, consonant with all that we have seen thus far. I am struck, particularly, by the constant re-iteration of the theme of freedom: freedom *from* stuff, leading to freedom *for* relationship. This resonates, again, with Cavanaugh's thesis around detachment and his urging of the need for re-connection. Their negative experiences of consumer society reflect Bauman's analysis of the depersonalisation and individualisation of consumerism and the impact that it has on relationships; a theme that will be returned to in Chapter Three.[45]

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[45] See, for example, Z. Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, 90, and, *Consuming Life*, 17-21.

The expression of freedom to which the interviewees give voice is consistent with the analysis of Grigsby that we drew in earlier, and her theory that simplicity is one way by which middle-class people are enabled to wrestle with questions of identity and meaning in a consumer society, and thus both critique and resist its hegemony.[46] She locates the US Voluntary Simplicity movement within an ideology of oppression and views the attempt to live more simply as one way by which white, middle-class people are fighting their experience of the difficulties that ensue from consumerism.[47] As we have seen already, and will see again in Chapter Three, Breathe members would clearly relate to that and view their life within consumer society as problematic.

In an important sense, then, what we see operating here is an issue of control and power. This is reflected in the use of active language that we noted in the questionnaire analysis and that is also apparent in the interviews: participants talked of, 'being intentional in decision making' (**A**), and, 'a kind of freedom in making good choices' (**D**). Through these choices, Breathe members are exercising some measure of control in a society in which the problems can seem so huge as to be uncontrollable, rendering people helpless. This, I believe, is the reason why, as Humphery expresses it, 'the calculated *overproduction* of certain commodities and commodity types, driven by the profit-motivated logic or global capital itself, remains far less exhaustively targeted by the new politics of consumption than the individual act of spending'.[48] This is illustrated in the poignant comment by **L** who said that his attempts at living more simply meant that, 'we don't feel entirely complicit anymore'. Here we return to the tension we saw earlier between micro and macro political engagement: the macro can appear too overwhelming - especially when accompanied by an awareness of one's complicity in the system – and so the micro becomes the focus of action. However, as will be seen in Chapter Three, engagement in the micro should not be seen as entirely reductionist and much value can be had from such involvement.

Living simply is thus a powerful psychological tool for the interviewees. But, it does not always come easily and people were willing to admit the challenges, alongside the benefits. What the interviews demonstrated was a high degree of wrestling with how,

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[46] Grigsby, *Buying Time*, 56.
[47] Grigsby, *Buying Time*, 54.
[48] Humphery, *Excess*, 171 (italics his).

practically, to live out the principles of simple living within a consumer society that is structured toward a very different type of life. Very noticeable within this was an acute sense of failure. Nearly every person interviewed added a caveat, at some point, showing their awareness that they were not reaching their goals. Phrases such as, 'I don't think I'm anywhere near succeeding' (**C**); 'I try in a number of things, but I fail in more aspects than I succeed in' (**C**), and, 'I'm sounding like this is something that I'm completely sorted at and it's totally not at all' (**K**), were just some of the comments. They felt they ought to be doing more but that life mitigated against them: 'I think probably time is a big factor; … there's lots of things I could do that would be more sustainable, but they require time' (**C**).

Thus the challenge of living in a society systemically structured to channel people into a life of high consumption was acutely felt. As **E** said, 'it's difficult within a system that isn't geared towards helping simple living'. This was not a theoretical issue, but something that was instantiated very practically. People talked about difficulties with travel, both locally (not being able to live near work; living in a town where it is easier to drive than take public transport) and more widely (challenges over whether or not to fly, with family and/or friends living in other countries). Housing was also discussed, with the only option being to live in a three-bedroomed house, which then mitigated against community and sharing; as was clothes, with struggles over ethical sourcing. Family pressures were mentioned, with **K** in particular wrestling with how to live out her values when her family saw things differently. Food was discussed with **E** commenting, 'it's just difficult because our whole system's … based on supermarkets and long transport lines and big farms'. One of the consequences of this, as we have seen, is that people can feel isolated and at odds with those around them. As **B** said, 'it is against the grain of the culture of the way everyone else is living, so sometimes you feel that doing the things that you do is a little bit odd.' Adding in the faith dimension then brings in a particular challenge as, 'I'm different in two ways: I'm different from secular environmental and those kind of groups by being Christian, and different from a lot of Christians in that I focus on simple living and environmental awareness' (**E**).

This difference extended into their church life. For many, their churches seemed to conform more to the society around them and to the very things with which they were

struggling, than to the clear lifestyle implications that they saw in the Bible. **L**, for example, talked amusingly of how,

> we would go to church and we found ourselves wanting to go shopping more often and judging our clothes and we were told, 'wouldn't it be nice to have this', and, 'this looks a bit old and faded and should be replaced'. And I realised we were getting it from the Christians!

And **B** commented that, 'the church is so distracted at the moment, by consumerism and by that life of acquiring more stuff and ambition'. **F** summed it up: 'the church in the West is basically no different from the rest of society in the West'.

Alongside this frustration, though, came a deep-seated desire to see the Church respond to consumer society and recognition of an opportunity for the Church to stand out. All of the interviewees expressed what a difference it would make to the Church if it embraced the path of simpler living, but it was articulated most fully by **A**:

> The more that we embrace simplicity and generosity, the more distinctive we become in the way that we live, in a way that doesn't mark us out like the Amish or the exclusive Brethren or the more sort of 'sect' Christianity, but just marks us out as just having a distinctively deeper-rooted way of life... It isn't simply a moral activity, it isn't simply about what we don't do, [it's] about embracing something much more fulfilling, and I think that there's a hunger for that.

The interviewees not only struggled with the external systemic structures of society and church: interestingly they also talked about their own internal struggles. **A** again:

> Every now and then you think, 'oh it'd be a bit nice to have a few more hundred pounds in the savings account for a rainy day', just to have it there just in case'. Sometimes I think, 'I just really want to go out and buy that', it's an impulse purchase, I just want to have it, and I think you always rail internally against the self-imposed discipline of going, 'no you don't really need this', and it probably wouldn't make you very happy for very long anyway. But in the moment I think, 'oh I really want this', but actually when you boil it down it's actually quite childish.

I talked of the battle she had with herself when she walked through the centre of town on her way to work: 'every lunchtime and after lunch I was having to go between work and home through the whole high street. And things looked lovely. And of course, "oh that's pretty, oh that's nice, oh I need that". If you see it it's kind of the

temptation. So I think the hardest thing is just not being lured back into it all really.' Having the strength to resist the power of advertisements was a factor in this, particularly for those participants who lived in London, as **K** explained: 'I take public transport every day and there's advertising absolutely everywhere, and we're just in it. Living in central London you're absolutely surrounded by adverts and it's just all-pervasive'.

There is an interesting dialogue taking place here: how far is living a simpler life a sacrifice? We noted in the questionnaire analysis that the decision to live more simply and to reduce one's expenditure and consumption was seen in wholly positive terms. However, participants' views on this became more nuanced in the interviews, as the more challenging aspects and the practical realities of such decisions became apparent. This is important because mainstream writing on simplicity focuses nearly exclusively on the positive benefits. Elgin, for example, entitles a section of his book, 'Simplicity is not Sacrifice'.[49] In this section, his desire is to invert society's way of thinking so that, 'sacrifice is a consumer lifestyle that is overstressed, overbusy, and overworked', whereas, 'simplicity yields lasting satisfactions that more than compensate for the fleeting pleasures of consumerism'.[50]

Elgin's motivation for writing in such a way is understandable. However, the struggles articulated by Breathe members suggest that this portrayal of simplicity lacks honesty and does not do justice to the practical experience. Such a portrayal is rightly challenged by Humphery. He tackles the oft-cited studies that show that psychological wellbeing does not increase in tandem with increased prosperity and notes that, whilst true, commentators neglect the fact that levels of wellbeing in economically wealthier countries still stay at a higher level than other less wealthy countries.[51] His point is not that these studies have no value, but that they overreach themselves in trying to demonstrate that reduced levels of consumption will always result in increased levels of wellbeing.

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[49] D. Elgin, *Voluntary Simplicity*, 4-6.
[50] D. Elgin, *Voluntary Simplicity*, 5.
[51] K. Humphery, *Excess*, 146. Ian Christie makes a similar point in commenting that, whilst the returns might be diminished as prosperity levels increase, they are still returns nonetheless (I. Christie, 'Human Flourishing and the Environment').

The conscious decision to live more frugally in order to free up time and money for relationships may well, indeed, result in higher levels of wellbeing, for all the reasons of connectivity that we have looked at previously. However, there is also a darker side that needs to be acknowledged. To use Humphery's words, 'the tendency to convey a politics of consumption through visions of change as gain alone eclipses the need to deal with the realities of sustainable consumption as *loss*'.[52] The sort of lifestyle that truly responds to the inequalities of our world and the ecological problems that it is facing will be one that requires people to live at such a reduced level as will, in all likelihood, be unacceptable to the majority of people living in the UK, Breathe members included. The question remains unanswered as to whether the goals of ecological sustainability, social justice, global equity and personal happiness can actually be complementary or not.[53]

I believe that the Christian faith expressed by interviewees has something unique to offer. A few of the participants articulated that the choices they were making were not simply seeking happiness, but reflected their understanding of sacrifice: a consequence of following a sacrificial, *kenotic* Christ. As **B** said, 'I think the most straight forward way is just to talk about following Jesus and what he called people to. Unlike what the New Economics Foundation might suggest, Jesus didn't make decisions based on his level of happiness... He called people to live lives that were sacrificial rather than self-centred, and I reckon that's probably where a lot of simplicity can come from.' This was reflected, too, in **L**'s comment about the New Testament, that, 'it talks about the cross. It talks about the surrender of self as a deeply Christian, deeply human posture.'

It is in this Christian concept of sacrifice that we discover that the choices are not actually mutually exclusive because they are rooted in Jesus' words that it is only when one loses one's life that one finds it: something that will be wrestled with more deeply in Chapter Four when we consider a Thomist approach to *eudaimonia*. A couple of people tried to give expression to that dual dynamic. It was interesting watching **J** wrestle with this when she said, 'that last question made me think that

[52] K. Humphery, *Excess*, 161 (italics his).
[53] K. Humphery, *Excess*, 97.

there's something about simplicity that's not comfortable. There's something that's supremely so uncomfortable, but at the same time is so addictively compelling and joyous in it, so I think it's probably… because if there wasn't a benefit to me… there's something about holding things in tension where that's actually a great place to be.' Interviewee **L** explained it in more theological terms:

> If creation is in the Son, then to be truly human and to be brought in to find your freedom – to find one's freedom - and place within the Son is to adopt in significant ways his posture of *kenosis*, and not a kind of cruel, empty abnegation of the self on its own terms, as it were, but within the giving of the Son to the Father and the Father to the Son, to find one's place within that rhythm, within that flow. And there are real movements of sacrifice in there, but also real movements of self-fulfilment, of resurrection.

CONCLUSION

The empirical research undertaken has provided a wealth of insight into one particular group of people attempting to live their lives more simply as they wrestle with what it means to be a follower of Jesus in contemporary consumer society. As a network, Breathe is functioning in a way that supports and encourages its members to stay on the path they have chosen and take further steps along it.

In its members we see a group of individuals who are trying to relate their faith to the problematic context in which they live. Problems of social injustice, ecological breakdown and existential harm are all issues that they see both as emerging from today's society and as issues that are directly relevant to the person of Christian faith. For them, simplicity is an integrated concept, strongly rooted in their Christian faith and bringing together a concern for others with a concern for one's own well-being and for the well-being of the wider creation.

The research has given us a useful lens through which we can investigate the notion of simplicity more fully and explore how it might function as a tool for living well in consumer society. But it has also raised many questions: what is 'enough'? How does one differentiate between needs and wants? What is a Christian attitude towards material goods and wealth? Is frugal living always a positive and, if not, how are notions of sacrifice to be reconciled with simplicity lived for the sake of one's own

well-being? Is the dichotomy between 'people' and 'stuff' as straight-forward as it appears? Are there positive aspects to consumerism? What role does the church play in these discussions?

In order to continue seeking an answer to these questions it is necessary first to consider more fully the context out of which Breathe emerges. In Chapter Three, therefore, we turn our attention to the different discourses within which Breathe stands.

CHAPTER THREE

THE DISCURSIVE FRAMEWORKS

Introduction

> Instead of treating resistance as a given response to an act (or acts) of domination, a reflection on culture reveals the ways in which resistances are constituted through the routines of everyday life.[54]

A key characteristic that was noted in the analysis of the questionnaires and interviews was the oppositional stance taken by the participants with their regular use of 'us and them' language. Having initially struggled to comprehend why they framed their thinking so strongly in this way, I now perceive it to be an essential part of how they articulate their resistance to the prevailing culture. It is one way by which they signal that their attempts to simplify their lives are not undertaken as a whim, but arise from clear ideological convictions; convictions that we have explored throughout the preceding analysis.

In this chapter I will explore from where those ideological convictions have arisen; to reflect on the different cultures that Breathe stands within that have led its members to the 'routines of everyday life' that they practice and to the patterns of thinking that they inhabit. Breathe both emerges from, and responds to, the intersection of a number of different discursive frameworks – global, political, cultural and ecclesiological – and it is these frameworks that need to be unpacked. We will therefore look at globalisation, consumerism and the ecclesiological context. In doing so, we will gain a better insight into the issues to which Breathe members are seeking to respond, and will be in a better position from which to investigate those issues theologically and consider what a faithful Christian response to them looks like: the subject matter of our next chapter.

In the sections on globalisation and consumerism, the potential scope for dialogue partners was vast, reflecting the fact that these topics have been considered within

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[54] L. Amoore, *The Global Resistance Reader*, 357.

many different academic fields such as philosophy, anthropology, sociology, political science, economics, religious studies and international relations.[55] There was a need, therefore, to bring a focus to our discussion and, to this end, two particular conversation partners were chosen.

Firstly, Beck is considered within the subject of globalisation. His work on the 'risk society' and the emergence of 'sub-politics' speaks directly to the strong sense emerging from the research that our participants do not see themselves as living a privatised life of simplicity, but view their efforts as part of how they engage in the very problems that globalisation creates and thus see what they are doing as political, in the broader sense envisaged by Beck.

Secondly, Bauman is considered within consumerism. He was chosen because his scathing critique of consumer society resonates with much of what the research participants themselves identify as problems within consumerism. Concurrently, however, my criticism of Bauman's unrelenting negativity highlights the tensions that there are within consumerism and the danger of being too simplistic in one's evaluation of it.

Both these commentators, therefore, were chosen because of the themes that emerged from the research and out of a desire to ensure that the literature linked closely and arose from the research itself.

1. The Global Framework

The questionnaire and interview analysis demonstrated that an overriding concern for Breathe members in their desire to live more simply was their awareness of global problems of inequality, injustice and environmental destruction. We will look at what actually is the state of the world to which participants want to respond. We will then turn our attention to debates around globalisation and development and consider where Breathe stands within this nexus of perspectives. Finally we will draw on Beck's category of 'risk society' to consider how globalisation has impacted the

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[55] For a bibliography related to these different fields see, R. Todd Peters, *In Search of the Good Life: The Ethics of Globalization*, 14.

emergence of a global civil society and the extent to which Breathe reflects that development.

i. The State of the World

Breathe members find themselves living in a world in which 828 million people live in urban slum conditions; 2.6 billion people lack access to flush toilets or decent sanitation facilities; 28 million children in conflict areas do not go to school; a quarter of the world's population live in extreme poverty (in sub-Saharan Africa that figure rises to 51%); nearly 43 million people are displaced because of conflict or persecution, and around 16.6 million children have lost either one or both of their parents to AIDS.[56] Global energy demand is growing by a third and looks set to be at least 4 degrees warmer than pre-industrial levels by the end of the Century; a world in which coral reefs could start dissolving by 2050; in which major food growing areas increasingly suffer from drought and floods, and in which 33% of amphibians and 25% of mammals are at risk of extinction.[57]

It is to such global issues that Breathe members are concerned to respond in various ways and, as we have seen, they see their everyday actions as one of the key ways to achieve this. This sentiment finds resonance in Giddens who says,

> The day-to-day actions of an individual today are globally consequential. My decision to purchase a particular item of clothing, for example, or a specific type of foodstuff, has manifold global implications. It not only affects the livelihood of someone living on the other side of the world but may contribute to a process of ecological decay which itself has potential consequences for the whole of humanity.[58]

Beck highlights this interconnection noting that, 'global risks entail being confronted with the global other. ...People have to conduct their lives in an exchange with others'.[59] As we saw in our previous chapter, one of the things that stood out with the Breathe participants was that the majority of them had their interest in social and

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[56] UN Millennium Goals Report 2011.

[57] International Energy Agency, *World Energy Outlook 2012*; World Bank, *Turn Down the Heat: Why a 4° World Must be Avoided*.

[58] U. Beck, A. Giddens and S. Lash, *Reflexive Modernization: Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order*, 57-58.

[59] U. Beck, 'Climate for Change, or How to Create a Green Modernity?', *Theory, Culture and Society* 27.2-3 (2010), 259.

environmental justice triggered by some sort of experience of poverty, whether overseas or in the UK. For Breathe members, the numbers just given are statistics to which they relate, through having witnessed the people and places behind those statistics and through the perceived links between their own individual actions and the state of the world.

ii. Globalisation

Breathe is operating within a framework of globalisation which, although rarely used itself by the research participants, is a word that, 'encapsulates our latest contemporary story'.[60] An extensively contested term, at its simplest, globalisation is, 'the process by which the world is becoming more and more connected and interdependent.'[61] This process has moved us from a world that is exclusively national and transnational, in which the primary world actors are those that exist within national boundaries, to one that is global, in which nationally-bounded actors jostle on the stage alongside those that operate across, and whose concerns are not restricted by, national boundaries. The global, therefore, 'refers to a different form of territoriality than the national', although this does not imply that the national is thereby excluded.[62]

There is constant debate over whether globalisation even exists; if it does, how far it differs from earlier historical, globalisation processes; and if it did exist, whether events such as the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the 2008 banking crisis and recession brought it to an end.[63] Globalisation still seems very much alive, albeit fluid and shifting, and Held and McGrew are right in identifying three reasons behind that: (i) it is socially embedded (globalisation is part of both our narrative and our experience); (ii) it is institutionally entrenched (the global institutions that support globalisation show no signs of moving away from it); and, (iii) there is no viable alternative.[64]

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[60] I. Linden, 'globalization and the Church: an overview', in, C. Reed, *Development Matters: Christian perspectives on globalisation*, 3.

[61] Department For International Development, 'Eliminating World Poverty: Making globalisation work for the poor', 15.

[62] H. Thorn, 'Social Movements, the Media and the Emergence of a Global Public Sphere: From Anti-Apartheid to Global Justice', *Current Sociology* 55.6 (2007), 899.

[63] Justin Rosenberg is one such 'globalisation denier': see, for example, 'Globalization Theory: A Post Mortem', *International Politics* 42 (2005), 2 – 74.

[64] D. Held and A. McGrew, *Globalization Theory: Approaches and Controversies*, 4.

In its current form, therefore, globalisation is a highly differentiated phenomenon that reflects many different networks of relationships. It is evolving constantly and is very complex to define, in large part because each commentator's definition comes from their own experience of globalisation, which varies depending on their geographical and social location. Like the Indian story of the elephant and the blind men, no one person has overall sight of what globalisation is. Indeed one can go further and suggest that there is no one elephant called 'globalisation': globalisation differs according to the sphere under discussion. Globalisation, as Held (et al.) say, should be, 'examined through a series of central domains of human activity, and [we must] recognize that a general account of globalization cannot simply read off or predict from one domain what has occurred or might occur in another'.[65]

Despite the many debates around globalisation, there is some unanimity around what those domains or, 'faces', are, and I will briefly explore the main four - the economic, political, technological, and cultural[66] - and consider Breathe's interrelationship with them. The economic face will be considered in more depth as we will shall return to the others later in the chapter.

Economic globalisation

The area of interconnectedness that features most prominently in discussions on globalisation is the economic. This is based on the so-called 'Washington Consensus', with its policies of trade liberalisation, privatisation, deregulation, financial liberalisation and debt-crisis management. The economic angle, therefore, provides globalisation with its *ideology*: an ideology that is founded on financial growth: As Bill Clinton said when US President, "I do not believe that a country with 4.5% of the world's people can maintain its standard of living if we don't have more customers".[67]

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[65] D. Held, A. McGrew, D. Goldblatt, and J. Perraton, J, *Global Transformations: Politics, Economics and Culture*, 25.

[66] Although I am choosing to concentrate on the economic, political, technological and cultural dimensions of globalisation, Held et al also highlight military globalisation and the globalisation of labour (D. Held, A. McGrew, D. Goldblatt, and J. Perraton, J, *Global Transformations*, 25). It could be argued, however, that these are further subsets of the main categories on which I am focussing.

[67] J. Bruges, *The Little Earth Book*, 81.

The most efficient means of generating financial growth is believed to be through free trade.

Economic globalisation in the form of free market economics is highly contested, attracting intense criticism from those who are concerned about the numbers of people still living in poverty, and the stubbornly ineradicable poverty. This is a facet of globalisation vulnerable to being dismantled in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis: something acknowledged even by the former head of the IMF, Dominic Strauss Khan, who said that the events since 2008 have, 'devastated the intellectual foundations of the global economic order of the last twenty-five years'.[68]

The criticism has come from different voices, speaking from diverse perspectives. Some speak from positions of power and essentially concur that free trade is poverty's remedy, but also acknowledge that the invisible hand of the market cannot be left entirely to its own devices and so some measure of state control is needed to encourage it forward but without its negative side-effects[69]. Others fundamentally reject globalisation as little more than a selfish ideology advanced by rich elites.[70] In between are a variety of views, often articulated and made visible at large-scale gatherings such as the alter-globalisation protests of Seattle etc., the regular Social Forums and the Occupy Wall Street/London movements.[71] There are other groups, too, often larger but less visible because they represent the powerless: groups such as Via Campesina and the Landless Workers Movement in Brazil. Of increasing importance, additionally, are the internet-based pressure groups that are able to mobilise sometimes hundreds of thousands of citizens around the world within

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[68] S. Panitchpadki, 'Preface to the report of the Secretary-General of UNCTAD to UNCTAD XIII' (http://www.policyinnovations.org/ideas/policy_library/data/01619, accessed 6.1.12).
[69] See, for example, some of the high-profile economists mentioned in D. Rodrik, 'The Death of the Globalization Consensus', http://www.policyinnovations.org/ideas/commentary/data/000072 (accessed 6.1.12).
[70] D. Rucht, 'Social Movements Challenging Neo-Liberal Globalization', in, P. Ibarra (ed.), *Social Movements and Democracy*, 214.
[71] For a thorough analysis of the rise of alter-globalization see G. Pleyers, *Alter-Globalization: Becoming Actors in a Global World*.

hours.[72] We will meet these groups again – and consider Breathe's place within them - in our consideration of global civil society.

One of the main criticisms of the dominant economic ideology has been that, where it has been used as a platform on which to build a development strategy, it has utilised a restricted definition of development that focuses exclusively on economic growth: what the President of UNCTAD denotes as 'Finance Led Growth'.[73] For many, this has brought enormous benefits, particularly in East Asia where the proportion of people living in poverty has fallen from 60% in 1990 to 16% in 2005, and even more specifically in China, where some expect poverty rates to be below 5% by 2015.[74]

However, it is now well acknowledged that those benefits have come at a three-fold price. Firstly, they have been extremely unevenly distributed. So, whilst East Asia may have experienced dramatic falls in poverty levels, that has not been the case in other areas. Indeed the UNDP states that if China is taken out of the equation, the number of people living on less than a dollar a day actually increased by 36 million between 1990 and 2005.[75] Secondly, the focus on economic growth has come at the expense of the environment, which has been stripped and changed almost beyond recognition in order to provide the resources upon which the growth has been built.[76] That has had, and will have, profound impacts on both human life[77] and on other creatures[78]: changes that are ultimately likely to undo much of the positive economic growth. Thirdly, growth for some has resulted in increasing inequality for many. Despite arguments to the contrary, this inequality would seem to be endemic to Neo liberal economic globalisation, resulting in a relationship between the two that is, 'troubling and problematic': globalisation, whilst certainly having lifted many out of poverty,

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[72] Avaaz (www.avaaz.org) and 350.org (www.350.org) are two of the best known global organisations. Avaaz has ten and a half million members. In the UK, 38 Degrees has become a thorn in the side to the current Conservative government (www.38degrees.org.uk).
[73] S. Panitchpadki, 'Preface'.
[74] UN Millennium Goals Report 2011, 6 – 7.
[75] Theos, Cafod and Tearfund, *Wholly Living: a new perspective on international development*, 15. And see Kaplinsky, *Globalization, Poverty and Inequality*, 45.
[76] See the graphic descriptions throughout B. McKibben, *Eaarth: Making a life on a tough new planet*.
[77] See, for example, the current report and future analyses provided in the UNDP's, 'Human Development Report 2011'.
[78] The IUCN's 'Red List of Threatened Species' contains vast amounts of information on this topic (see http://www.iucnredlist.org/).

operates a win/lose scenario in that the very success that some experience causes the increasing poverty of others.[79]

As already observed, Breathe's participants are intensely aware of these problems. The movement's birth at the Make Poverty History march in Edinburgh in 2005 (referenced by **L**) locates them firmly outside the Neo Liberalism camp and within that of alter-globalization, as does their keen interest in supporting Fair Trade through their shopping practices. **B** relates his interest in simplicity directly to studying International Relations at university and to what he learned there about, 'economics and development stuff … and some of the ways that we structure the economy'. As he says, reflecting the overall character of globalisation, 'you begin to see connections everywhere'.

The economic debates within globalisation are stimulated by those who desire to see an end to the desperate poverty and inequality, and those debates involve deeper issues of what it is to be human and what sort of development is therefore required, and then how to achieve it. These debates are reflected in many of the aspirations and frustrations that were expressed during the interviews. In particular, **I** (a former aid-agency worker), asked the question,

> What do we mean by helping, if we're about development but we can see the way we have developed in the West being so destructive to the planet and then to communities? What on earth is it we are trying to do for people? How do we marry these things? Because we cannot hope every single person on the planet will have this kind of western lifestyle because it won't work.

Christie writes, 'the growth model of development focuses on individuals and their consumption within a system of choices and consequences. It neglects the social and environmental relationships in which people are embedded'.[80] This statement encapsulates the sentiments around these issues that come from the Breathe participants, with their emphasis on relationships and on a life that does not pursue financial gain at the expense of other human beings and the wider world.

Political globalisation

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[79] R. Kaplinsky, *Globalization, Poverty and Inequality*, 7, 233 – 234.
[80] I. Christie, 'Human Flourishing and the Environment', 3.

One consequence of the economic face of globalisation is that, 'states are now agencies of the global economy. Competitiveness in the world market is the ultimate criterion of state policy'.[81] What this quote makes clear is that the economic face of globalisation does not exist in a vacuum: it is enabled to happen through specific political decisions taken at both a national level, through state governments, and at a global level, through institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank, as well at a regional level, through blocs such as the EU. This is the *engine* of globalisation. What we witness is the conflicted nature of the political face of globalisation as nation states push for other countries to lower their trade barriers, whilst trying to maintain control and protection over their own. The level of ability with which a state government is able to do so reflects their status and position of power within the world scene.

What we witness additionally is that political power is now located not only in national governments but in a number of other significant players too: the global and regional institutions above, and also business interests and civil society groups. We will delay discussion about the rise of civil society - and its implications for Breathe - until further into this chapter. Business interests, though, have gained immense political power. Steger cites the example of Nokkia, which represents two-thirds of the Finnish nation's stock market value and a fifth of the nation's total export. Finnish commentators are wary of the power that this brings the company and its managers and fear that it could pressure the government to move away from its strong welfare system in favour of lower corporate taxes.[82]

Technological globalisation
Nokkia's products connect one billion people around the world.[83] It demonstrates the enormous rise of technology, which has become the *fuel* that powers globalisation. Technology stands behind the seismic shifts in world politics that have led to the collapse of communism and the dominance of capitalism as the only viable economic ideology (witness the 1989 'TV Revolutions' and, more recently, the 'Twitter

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[81] R. Cox, 'Civil society at the turn of the millennium: prospects for an alternative world order', in, L. Amoore (ed.), *The Global Resistance Reader*, 109.
[82] M. Steger, *Globalization: A Very Short Introduction*, 51.
[83] M. Steger, *Globalization*, 51.

Revolutions' of 2011[84]). It is technology that, on a more mundane level, enables global politics to function, through facilitating travel and communication, and it is technology that has facilitated the economics of globalisation, which operates almost entirely in the computerised virtual sphere.

Were it not for technology, groups such as Breathe could not function as they do. Even fifteen years ago, Breathe could not have existed as it does today: it is truly a child of its time. Nonetheless, Breathe finds itself in an ambivalent position, on the one hand embracing technology, but on the other hand recognising its danger, and we shall consider this technological face again in due course.

Cultural globalisation

These three faces of globalisation - the econonomic, political and technological – have had a profound effect on culture; what I would call the *manifestation* of globalisation. Humanity is more interconnected and more mobile than ever before (although that is not always for the good, as we shall see). In 1800 people in the USA travelled about fifty meters a day; in 2002 they travelled an average fifty kilometres.[85] Television and the internet have enabled a communications revolution, allowing news, information and values to be transmitted and disseminated more extensively than at any other time in history. Television is the ubiquitous symbol of globalisation, with some 98% of homes in the USA and the UK owning at least one television. Social networking sites, such as FaceBook and Twitter, allow people to be in contact with others all over the world, and for some to build up mass followings.[86]

The impact that globalisation has had on the family is emphasised particularly by Giddens, who states, 'among all the changes going on today, none are more important than those happening in our personal lives - in sexuality, emotional life, marriage and the family. There is a global revolution going on in how we think of ourselves and how we form ties and connections with others.'[87] The advent of sophisticated

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[84] The dubbing of the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt as the 'Twitter Revolutions' is not uncontested. Nonetheless, one of their notable features was the key role that Twitter played in helping activists co ordinate their activities.

[85] J. Urry, 'Consuming the Planet to Excess', *Theory, Culture and Society* (27.2-3), 200.

[86] Lady Gaga is 'followed' by 17 million people on Twitter and is the most 'googled' person in the world.

[87] A. Giddens, 'Family', in 'Runaway World' (Reith Lecture no. 4).

contraception, the feminist movement, and the intensification of consumer culture have all radically changed relationships and familial identity and practice, with complicated family arrangements and both parents out at work.[88]

Whilst we have already considered some of the problems of poverty and inequality inherent within contemporary globalisation, one of the strongest cultural changes has been in contemporary understandings of social stratification, highlighting globalisation's uneven character. As Held et al say, 'it both reflects existing patterns of inequality and hierarchy while also generating new patterns of inclusion and exclusion, winners and losers'.[89] Those patterns of inclusion and exclusion are based on how far an individual is able to participate in technology-driven, consumer society. Cox delineates the human population into three main categories: (i) those at the top who are integrated into the management levels, who make the decisions, carry out the research, maintain the system and 'propagate the ideology of globalisation'; (ii) the second level, which is the vast number of those who support the top category, consists of people with lesser skills, who exist where the work is offered and are often in precarious positions; and, (iii) the third level, who are excluded from international production. They are 'the unemployed and many small low-technology enterprises in the richer countries and a large part of the marginalized population in poor countries'.[90]

Another category of stratification revolves around mobilisation. We stated earlier that humanity is more mobile than ever before, but this observation operates on different levels. On the one hand, differentiation exists between those who are able to be mobile and those who are not. Much of Bauman's exploration of globalisation is built on this stratification; his 'top level' person is the one who is extra-territorial and who has most in common, and networks with, those at a similar level across the globe. Thus, 'mobility climbs to the rank of the uppermost among the coveted values – and the freedom to move, perpetually a scarce and unequally distributed commodity, fast

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[88] Family studies within sociology is an area far larger than this one short paragraph would belie. For a helpful overview into the many debates that it involves, see C. Smart, *Personal Life: New Directions in Sociological Thinking.*
[89] D. Held et al, *Global Transformations*, 27.
[90] R. Cox, 'Civil society at the turn of the millennium: prospects for an alternative world order', in, L. Amoore (ed.), *The Global Resistance Reader*, 108-109.

becomes the main stratifying factor of our… times'.[91] The mobile are able to pursue employment opportunities and escape more localised problems. This results in the loss of responsibility (what Beck dubs, 'organized irresponsibility') for any specific location, something that Beck, Bauman and Berry all highlight.[92] It also comes at an environmental cost as it is dependent on what Urry calls, 'high carbon mobility systems'.[93]

At the heart of this 'organized irresponsibility' is a lack of relationships, since one does not love what one does not know. As we saw in Chapter Two, part of the move towards simpler living is the desire to solidify relationships, and one part of that is staying and being rooted in one area, rather than constantly being on the move. This was expressed very practically by **F** who said, 'one of the primary reasons I stay in Oxford is because of my relationships and the sense of community I have here with my neighbours and also with my church. And the fact that two of my three siblings are here with their spouses and children.'

However, alongside the freedom to move, the freedom to *stay* is also becoming an aspect of the stratification around mobilisation. Referring back to the Global Adaptation Index, we noted that it was the economically more developed countries that had the better rankings and whose citizens will not experience the worst of the predicted environmental and social problems and so will not be forced to move. When one considers the Bangladeshi farmer, constantly moving his dwelling place, family and possessions back each year as the sea encroaches, one realises that the freedom to stay will increasingly become a luxury afforded only to the privileged minority of the world. Although I would suggest that Bauman's preoccupation with mobility means that he misses this link between those who are free to move and those who are free to stay, he does also write strongly about the refugee problem, describing how, 'hundreds of thousands, sometimes millions of people are chased away from their homes, murdered or forced to run for their lives outside the borders of their country'. In typical fashion, his judgement of the situation is that, 'perhaps the

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[91] Z. Bauman, *Globalisation: the Human Consequences*, 2 (italics his).
[92] E.g. U. Beck, *World Risk Society*, 6; Z. Bauman, *Globalization*, 8-9; W. Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community*, 8.
[93] J. Urry, 'Consuming the Planet to Excess', *Theory, Culture and Society* (27.2-3), 200.

sole thriving industry in the lands of the latecomers (deviously and often deceitfully dubbed "developing countries") is the *mass production of refugees*'.[94]

Globalisation is a pivotal framework within which Breathe are operating: a framework of connections and consequences; of inequalities and innovations; of development and disasters. Whilst often not explicitly aware of it, our research participants relate to each one of these four faces both through the priorities they identify and the way they operate. I will conclude our discussion on the global framework by turning to consider where Beck's 'Risk Society' thesis informs our understanding of Breathe's global location.

iii. The Risk Society

My intention here is not to engage in a full discussion of Beck's thesis.[95] What is relevant to our interests is the acutely political nature of his sociological analysis. Correlating to our earlier discussion of the political face of globalisation, Beck observes that what has emerged is a 'powerplay between territorially fixed political actors (governments, parliament, unions) and non-territorial economic actors (representatives of capital, finance, trade).[96] As that powerplay has ensued, the nation state has proved incapable of dealing effectively with the problems with which our industrialised liberal society is beset and the non-territorial actors have stepped into the vacuum.[97] This is problematic since, as we have noted earlier, non-territorial actors bear little territorial responsibility and are not always overly interested in democratic principles. Moreover, when nation states are involved in decision-making processes, the power weightings ascribed to different countries are disproportionate, reflecting those countries' economic and military strength: a problem exacerbated by the lack of some sort of parliamentary control at an international level.

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[94] Z. Bauman, *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty*, 33 (italics his).
[95] For that see, for example, G. Mythen, 'Reappraising the Risk Society Thesis: Telescopic Sight or Myopic Vision?', *Current Sociology* 55.6, 799 – 801; B. Adam, U. Beck and J. Van Loon, *The Risk Society and Beyond: Critical Issues for Social Theory*, 33 – 46; and, M. Ekberg, 'The Parameters of the Risk Society: A Review and Exploration', *Current Sociology* 55.3 (2007), 361.
[96] U. Beck, *World*, 11.
[97] A. Giddens, *Sociology*, 102.

The impact this has had on politics is debatable. For some, democracy has become a casualty of globalisation, leading to disillusionment amongst the voting population.[98] Sharply declining electoral turnouts in the UK would seem to confirm this.[99] On the other hand, for those with the motivation so to do, it has pushed them out to explore other channels of political involvement.[100] For Beck, globalisation generates new kinds of democratic sub-politics as the political restructuring means that politics cannot any longer be fully equated with the political system: 'the truly political disappears in and from the political system and reappears, changed and generalized, in a form that remains to be comprehended and developed, as *sub(system)politics* in all the other fields of society'.[101] Politics is thus conducted at 'social "sites" that were previously considered unpolitical', sites such as, 'the firm, the laboratory, at the gas station, or in the supermarket'.[102] Such a view reflects the 'double-movement' thesis of Polanyi: that the principle of economic liberalism is accompanied by the reaction of social protection.[103]

This manifestly relates to Breathe. Our next section shows how aspects of what they do are concerned with retreating from the negative impacts of globalisation, although they want also to use their life actions positively to engage in global structures and bring about change. They stand unequivocally within the sphere of global civil society and the alter-globalisation movement that seeks to articulate a practical and philosophical approach to a variety of issues including particularly issues of peace, solidarity, anti-colonialism, feminism and ecology.[104] It is not necessary here to

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[98] See, for example, D. Rucht, 'Social Movements Challenging Neo-Liberal Globalization', in, P. Ibarra, *Social Movements and Democracy*, 217.

[99] See, http://www.ukpolitical.info/Turnout45.htm (accessed 12.1.12), and, http://www.york.ac.uk/news-and-events/news/2005/uk-elections/ (accessed 12.1.12).

[100] This political reconstitution receives negative and positive appraisals by different commentators (L. Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics*, 6 – 10). Kitschelt makes the point that, 'social movements, interest groups, and parties are purely analytical constructs that allow us to characterize the mix of strategies political entrepreneurs and their constituencies employ in their practices of collective political mobilization' (H. Kitschelt, 'Landscapes of Political Interest Mediation: Social Movements, Interest Groups, and Parties in the Early Twenty-First Century', in, P. Ibarra, *Social Movements*, 83).

[101] U. Beck, *World*, 91.

[102] U. Beck, *World*, 93, and from the abstract to, U. Beck, 'Subpolitics: Ecology and the Disintegration of Institutional Power', *Organization and Environment* 10:1, 52.

[103] K. Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: the political and economic origins of our time*, Part II.

[104] H. Thorn, ''Social Movements, the Media and the Emergence of a Global Public Sphere: From Anti-Apartheid to Global Justice', *Current Sociology* 55.6, 901.

rehearse the contested areas that swirl around the study of new social movements.[105] What is important for our purposes is to see Breathe as located within this socio-*political* sphere. Our empirical analysis has shown that Breathe members do not see themselves as engaged in a purely privatised lifestyle initiative. Whilst there exist different levels of articulation within the group, overall they match Falk's description of global civil society as being,

> the field of action and thought occupied by individual and collective citizen initiatives of a voluntary, non-profit character both within states and transnationally. These initiatives proceed from a global orientation and are responses, in part at least, to certain globalizing tendencies that are perceived to be partially or totally adverse.[106]

Bretherton, in his analysis of the role that political consumerism plays in Christian witness and the forging of public friendships within a world of global capitalism, makes the salient point that, 'to act as political animals we must act in our capacity as consumers because the global market is just as determinative of political life as the local political institutions of a particular state (and in some cases more so).[107] Bretherton is concerned with the restricted notion of political consumerism, and Fair Trade in particular, but it should also extend further to embrace the many different actions that Breathe members take in order to simplify their lives: growing their own food; limiting the amount of time they spend watching the television; practising generosity; reducing their energy usage etc. All these actions have political implications because we inhabit a world in which the political, economic and social are so closely intertwined. To use Micheletti's memorable phrase, Breathe are engaged in acts of, 'thinking politically privately'.[108]

We recall here the debate in the previous chapter around micro and macro involvement and the criticism coming from Humphery and Grigsby that micro involvement is inadequate. That criticism still stands and, undoubtedly, the types of actions mentioned above are at a different end of the spectrum to the actions of, for

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[105] See D. Della Porta and M. Diani, *Social Movements: An Introduction*, and M. Mayo, *Global Citizens: Social Movements and the Challenge of Globalization*, chapter 3.

[106] R. Falk, 'Global civil society: Perspectives, initiatives, movements', in, L. Amoore, *The Global Resistance Reader*, 125.

[107] L. Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics*, 187.

[108] M. Micheletti, *Political Virtue*, 2.

example, the Occupy movement or the earlier Seattle demonstrations. Nonetheless, these actions are neither invalid nor impotent and they operate along a continuum, functioning as 'soft' resistance, alongside the 'hard' resistance of these other, more visual, manifestations.

Globalisation is possibly *the* determinative framework that has been influential in Breathe's birth and development as people seek to use everyday lifestyle decisions to resist its hegemony. But there is still much that has been left unsaid in the preceding analysis that relates to Breathe, particularly in the socio-cultural domain, and so we turn now to a consideration of the society that Breathe members inhabit in order to map Breathe onto that grid.

2. The Consumer Framework

Our previous section described Breathe's concern with issues of global poverty, inequality and environmental destruction. We looked at globalisation and Beck's RS thesis and how Breathe members wish to participate in a solution to those problems. From this perspective, simplicity is an outward focussed way of life, lived in order to help other people and places.

However, the research analysis of the previous chapter demonstrated that intertwined with that outward focussed approach is also a particular understanding of contemporary society and the consequences of that society on their lives. Concerns around busyness, identity, the pressure to buy and the implications that these have for self and community were strongly vocalised throughout the interviews. Indeed, it is notable that Breathe's founder Mark Powley's recent book on 'detoxing' from consumer society has virtually no mention of Breathe members' wider concerns and focuses almost exclusively on the personal effects of living in a consumer society.[109] We may assume that Powley wishes to avoid a guilt-inducing focus on individual complicity in global problems and strike a more positive and life-affirming note. This leaves him open, though, to the charge of writing a book 'against' consumerism that arises from the same foundations upon which consumerism itself is built, namely the search for personal fulfilment, a point that will be returned to in Chapter Four.

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[109] The three places where global issues are mentioned are on pages 18, 208-210, and 217.

Consumer society – that which we identified earlier as the 'cultural face' of globalisation – manifestly raises significant concerns for our research participants and in our next section we focus on a deeper examination of this cultural face. That examination will proceed, firstly, through an overview of some of the main areas of disputation and interpretation within the social scientific study of consumer society. This is necessary in order to understand where Breathe are located within these debates. Secondly, we will conduct a more specific consideration of the ills that Breathe members associate with it. This latter discussion we will draw particularly on the prodigious work of Bauman, a prolific expositor on the negative characteristics of our contemporary culture.

i. Consumer Society

Initial analysis on consumer society came from a Marxist, economistic perspective and is associated with the Frankfurt School and especially with the writings of Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse. For them, the producers were the meaning makers: through advertisements and the hegemonic 'culture industry' they changed people from producers and citizens to passive consumers, stimulating demand for the mass of things that they were producing and commodifying objects in the process.

As we will see, this initial response to consumerism has been followed by more nuanced ways of looking at the relationships between producer, consumer and the sphere of exchange. Nonetheless, these early writers laid important foundations of critique, especially around the notions of commodification and hegemony, which still undergird contemporary appraisals of consumer culture, as was noted in our previous chapter with Miller's writing on commodification, and will be highlighted again further on.[110] Chiming with aspects of the discussion of the last chapter, Breathe participants particularly relate to the hegemonic critique as they relate to a culture that dictates to them how they are supposed to live. In the words of **H**, 'we're surrounded the whole time by all the messages telling us that we need more and we need more', and **F** talked about the need to be counter-cultural, 'because of the

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[110] Another contemporary example is R. Cox, 'Gramsci, hegemony and international relations: an essay in method', in, *The Global Resistance Reader*, who draws heavily on hegemonic theory deriving from Gramsci's Marxian thought.

pressure to buy things'. The participants view simplicity as a means of shunning those messages, as can be seen in, *Consumer Detox*, in which Powley devotes a whole chapter to the advertising industry and resisting its power.[111]

Consumerism cannot be viewed in purely economistic terms. It is vital also to consider the processes at work during the act of consuming itself, recognising that that act is not only concerned with the initial purchase but extends to encompass the entire life-cycle of an object and its use (and disposal) by the consumer. If it is not sufficient merely to label the consumer a dupe, we must consider what other dynamics are taking place through consumer behaviour.

A key motif in consumer studies has been the understanding of consumerism as communication, concentrating on what the consumer intends to communicate through their consumer practices, rather than on what the producer is doing. The foundations for this line of enquiry were laid at the end of the nineteenth century by Veblen in his study of 'conspicuous consumption': his term for how rich Americans were communicating their wealth in the new urban industrial environments. According to Veblen the rich consume because, 'the canon of reputability is at hand and seizes upon such innovations as are, according to its standard, fit to survive. Since the consumption of these more excellent goods is an evidence of wealth, it becomes honorific; and conversely, the failure to consume in due quantity and quality becomes a mark of inferiority and demerit'.[112]

Veblen thus emphasised that goods are used to make statements about the user, by the user. This groundwork was then built on in two directions. Firstly, Bourdieu used his empirical studies of French society, conducted through the 1960s, as the basis for his work on class classification.[113] In this, he developed his concept of 'cultural capital' (ie non-financial social goods such as education in linguistics and art) and considered how such cultural capital was used to discriminate between, and determine the hierarchy of, different social groupings.[114] Bourdieu's empirical research

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[111] M. Powley, *Consumer Detox*, chapter 4.
[112] T. Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions*, 73-74.
[113] P. Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*.
[114] M. Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*, 8.

demonstrated that cultural tastes clustered together in a depressingly predictable manner related to social class (as determined by education and father's profession); a clustering that he called 'habitus'.[115]

Key to his thesis was the recognition that taste in what he called 'legitimate culture' (as opposed to middle-brow and popular culture), rather than being 'a gift of nature' was, in fact, 'the product of upbringing and education'. Thus, 'to the socially recognized hierarchy of the arts, and within each of them, of genres, schools or periods, corresponds a social hierarchy of the consumers'. Because of this, taste functions 'as markers of class'.[116] Veblen's conspicuous consumption thereby developed into consumption as 'marks of distinction': ostentation gave way to taste, which only operates in distinction from distaste.

Secondly, writing in a similar period to Bourdieu, Baudrillard shifted thinking away from how objects functioned in society and onto what, therefore, the objects themselves had become. Arising from Barthes and semiology, he saw that, once an object had lost its original use-value and was free to float around, conveying good or bad taste, it became essentially a sign. As he put it, the 'social logic of consumption' is not 'that of the individual appropriation of the *use-value* of goods and services… . It is a logic not of satisfaction, but of the production and manipulation of social signifiers'.[117] As with Bourdieu, so for Baudrillard, the point of these signifiers was location within a social group, both by similarity and dissimilarity: 'you never consume the object in itself (in its use-value); you are always manipulating objects (in the broadest sense) as signs which distinguish you either by affiliating you to your own group taken as an ideal reference or by marking you off from your group by reference to a group of higher status'. Baudrillard went further than Bourdieu in recognising that the 'use-value' of objects has now actually become their sign value.[118]

Consumerism as communication has thus been an important notion used by interpreters of consumer society. However, this understanding has been widely

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115 Bourdieu, *Distinction : A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste.*
116 Ibid., xxiv – xxv.
117 J. Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures,* 61.
118 V. Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture,* 61.

criticised as later analysts have baulked at the normative stance of the interpretations. Alongside the early, Marxist analyses, which excoriated the evils of consumerism (its alienation, commodification and oppression), these interpretations have revelled in revealing the shallowness of consumer culture and its signs. Heath and Potter expose the inherent normativity when they discuss Baudrillard's dialogue on '*le gadget*' and, in particular, his ridicule of the two-speed windshield wiper that clearly nobody actually needed.[119]

The problem with these macro approaches (and where Bourdieu importantly differed) is that they are not based on empirical analysis. As such, the critiques come across as elitist and, in themselves, as reflecting the *taste* of 'middle-aged intellectuals': 'Budweiser bad, single malt Scotch good; Hollywood movies bad, performance art good; Chryslers bad, Volvos good; hamburgers bad, risotto good and so on'.[120] The sentiments expressed here by Heath and Potter reflect the dissonance prevalent in consumer studies in general between macro, normative critiques and micro, empirical analyses (an issue highlighted again with reference to Bauman, below).[121]

Despite the criticism, however, this perspective is not one that can be ignored altogether and it is something that was expressed through the research interviews. So, for example, interviewee **F** talked about the pressure experienced by friends of hers who would ask, 'are you living in the right area? Are your children going to the right school? Are they wearing the right clothes from the right kind of store? Are you buying your food from the right shop? Are you driving the right kind of car? Are you going on holiday to the right kind of places?'.

There is no doubt that one of the drivers of consumerism is a pressure to conform to – and sometimes exceed - the consumerist habits of one's peers.[122] This happens at different levels for different people. For some, Veblen's 'conspicuous consumption' is an appropriate term, whilst for others Bauman's 'marks of belonging' would seem

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[119] Heath, *The Rebel Sell: How the Counterculture Became Consumer Culture.* 107 – 108.
[120] Ibid. 108.
[121] C. Smart, *Personal Life: New Directions in Social Thinking*, 8 – 9.
[122] A current radio advertisement for a competition to win a car finishes with the line that if you win the car you will generate, 'the envy of all your neighbours'.

more apt.[123] For many, Heath and Potter's description of 'defensive consumption', akin to an arms race, will be apposite, reflecting Adam Smith's statement that people wish simply to 'live a life without shame'.[124] People are trying to keep up, keep ahead or keep in and it is not appropriate to attempt to formulate one defining macro-thesis as to what is taking place when people consume.[125] As Gabriel and Lang stress, consumers are unmanageable and uncontrollable.[126]

Gabriel and Lang's description reinforces the view that, as Ilmonen says, 'consumers are not a faceless mass who blindly follow the marketing pied pipers'.[127] However, we must be careful before we proclaim the consumer as king (or queen) too speedily because the parameters of consumer choice are prescriptively set within the structures of the consumer society in which one lives.[128] The relationship between consumer, producer, the sphere of exchange and the material goods themselves is complex and it is most helpful to view consumerism as something that both constrains and enables and to describe the consumer, in the words of Bretherton, as, 'neither an autonomous chooser nor a gulled fool, but an active and reflexive participant'.[129]

Before we turn to look more specifically at the struggles that Breathe members have with consumerism, there are two further aspects that are important to highlight. The one is to emphasise the positive aspects of consumer culture. On a purely material level, as Twitchell asks, who amongst us *really* would want to go back to 1900?[130] But, more broadly than this, consumerism can provide intellectual stimulation and enjoyable entertainment; it fosters innovation and can provide meaningful work; it

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[123] Z. Bauman, *Consuming Life*, 83.
[124] J. Heath and A. Potter, *The Rebel Sell*, 102 – 106. Sen's phrase is used by J. Urry in, 'Consuming the Planet to Excess', *Theory, Culture and Society* (27.2-3), 203.
[125] I also suspect that such mundane factors as age and personality type are also involved in how one acts and responds within consumer culture, but to explore these areas is way beyond the bounds of this thesis.
[126] Y. Gabriel and T. Lang, *The Unmanageable Consumer: Contemporary Consumption and its Fragmentation*, 191, cited in, S. Miles, K. Meethan and A. Anderson, 'Introduction: the meaning of consumption', in S. Miles, K. Meethan and A. Anderson, *The Changing Consumer: Markets and Meanings*, 5.
[127] K. Ilmonen, K. (author), with, P. Sulkunen, J. Gronow, A. Noro, K. Rahkonen and A. Warde (eds.), *A Social and Economic Theory of Consumption*, 164.
[128] A point made by a number of commentators, for example, A. Warde, 'Setting the scene: Changing conceptions of consumption', in, S. Miles, K. Meethan and A. Anderson, *The Changing Consumer*, 17 – 19.
[129] L. Bretherton, *Christianity*, 181.
[130] J. Twitchell, *Lead Us into Temptation*, 33.

leads to a more interesting and aesthetically pleasing society; it can support social relationships; it helps people express their identity, and it leads to a more comfortable and convenient life.[131]

That material goods function as more than simply markers of social distinction is an important point to recognise, as shown particularly through Miller's studies of everyday objects and their owners, which highlight the multifarious ways in which the people he studied along one particular street related to and used the objects in their homes.[132] Sassatelli discusses this in relation to supermarket shopping and shows the bond that is created between the prime shopper (often the mother) and other family members, as she chooses food and other goods that she knows will please and/or benefit them.[133]

The second point, reflecting our previous discussion on the consumer as autonomous chooser or gulled fool, is the importance of the rise of the concept of consumer itself as an identifiable subject in its own right. This is a novel social development and Lury suggests that it is this – the emergence of the consumer as a category - that distinguishes consumer culture from other cultures.[134] Being a consumer entails being located within a society that shapes its inhabitants in that particular way. Sassatelli (and she is not alone) makes the significant point that, 'the particular cultural politics of value which underpins the development of "consumer society" is thus not a natural one, it is one which requires a process of learning whereby social actors are practically trained to perform (and enjoy) their role as consumers'.[135]

The emergence of the consumer as a specific social identity is a notion that Bauman has highlighted strongly in his writings on consumerism and I suggest that it is this identity that lies at the heart of Breathe's problems with consumer society. In other

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[131] For a fuller explanation of this list and an accompanying bibliography, see A. Warde, 'Setting the Scene: Changing conceptions of consumption', in, S. Miles, K. Meethan and A. Anderson, *The Changing Consumer*, 13 – 17.
[132] D. Miller, *The Comfort of Things*.
[133] R. Sassatelli, *Consumer Culture*, 63. A fascinating look at the concept of 'foodies' and how they are operating sociologically is provided by J. Johnston and S. Baumann, *Foodies: Democracy and Distinction in the Gourmet Foodscape*.
[134] C. Lury, *Consumer Culture*, 30 – 31.
[135] R. Sassatelli, *Consumer Culture*, 11. See also Baudrillard, *The Consumer Culture*, 81).

words, the question they wrestle with is, how does one function well as – and indeed how far should one even be – a consumer when one's primary identity is as a follower of Jesus Christ?

As the research has been analysed, it is my contention that there are four main concerns that Breathe members have with consumerism. These are: fragmented relationships, exiguous time, unsustainable consumption, and illusionary happiness. These struggles can be framed as coming from life lived in the context of what Bauman has termed 'Liquid Modernity', and so it is helpful to draw on what he means by this phrase as a way of exploring the particular concerns held by the Breathe participants.

ii. Breathe and Liquid Modernity

> The solids whose turn has come to be thrown into the melting pot and which are in the process of being melted at the present time, and the time of fluid modernity, are the bonds which interlock individual choices in collective projects and actions – the patterns of communication and coordination between individually conducted life policies on the one hand and political actions of human collectivities on the other.[136]

For Bauman, the sense of liquidity is set in contrast to the earlier stage of 'solid' modernity: that time when overarching ideologies fixed people in place and power was securely tethered to national politics; a time of stability and permanence.[137] There are clear links with our earlier discussions around globalisation and the impact that that has had on the economic and political spheres as both spheres have lost their rootedness and become fissiparous: the economic melting away into the virtual realm, and the political into a multitude of disparate and contested areas. In fact, Davies postulates that it is Bauman's increasing desire to focus his attention on a moral critique of globalisation that led him to abandon the concept of postmodernity in favour of the term 'liquid modernity'.[138]

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[136] Z. Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, 6.
[137] M.H. Jacobsen and S. Marshman, 'Bauman's Metaphors: The Poetic Imagination in Sociology', *Current Sociology* 56:5, 805.
[138] M. Davies, *Freedom and Consumerism: A Critique of Zygmunt Bauman's Sociology*, 52.

'Liquid modernity' is thus Bauman's term for what he frequently also calls 'negative globalisation'. He sees this as having had a number of intense impacts on social life. One of the most pervasive of these impacts is the development of a society based around fear, reflecting Beck. Fear is the result of living in a society that has lost it moorings; where the pace of change is 'mind-boggling', unpredictable and uncontrollable.[139] Fear becomes a controlling aspect of society and we spend our lives trying to secure ourselves against those fears, through retreating into our private spheres and erecting physical and emotional barriers.[140]

Insecurity becomes the hallmark of 'liquid modernity' as uncertainties are experienced in all aspects of personal life: from our job security and personal finances to our identities; from our faith in politics and political leaders to the shape and strength of our personal relationships; from our perceptions of fear and crime in our communities to our and our children's future prospects.[141] The most worrying aspect of this for the individual is that, 'the burden of pattern-weaving and the responsibility for failure [falls] primarily on the individual's shoulders'.[142]

Bauman calls this, 'individualization', a term that resonates with Beck and Giddens' use of the term.[143] This term moves beyond the commonly understood meaning of individualism to the very specific idea of the onus being on the individual both to create their own identities and sustain their 'saleability' in the market place, turning the consumer themselves into a commodity.[144] This involves both considerable skill and an ability to negotiate and use the various 'authorities' on hand to offer advice.[145] But – reflecting the point made earlier about whether or not the consumer reigns - it also comes with the awareness that the individual, whilst shouldering all the responsibility, is not actually really free in the choices that they have set before them: 'all too often, however, one needs to exercise that responsibility under conditions that entirely elude one's own, intellectual as well as practical, grasp'.[146]

[139] Z. Bauman, *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty*, 11.
[140] Ibid., chapter 1.
[141] M. Davis, 'Bauman's Compass: Navigating the current interregnum', *Acta Sociologica* 54, 186.
[142] Z. Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, 7.
[143] See their extended discussions in U. Beck, A. Giddens and S. Lash, *Reflexive Modernization*.
[144] See, inter alia, *Consuming Life*, 9, 111; *The Art of Life*, chapter 2, and, *Liquid Modernity*, 62.
[145] Z. Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, 64.
[146] Z. Bauman, *The Art of Life*, 53.

Bauman perceives this to have worryingly detrimental effects on relationships because it leads to competition rather than cooperation, on a personal scale as well as at work. Bauman has a negative view of the 'liquid modern' consumer as someone who 'only cares for themselves and does so by demeaning others'.[147] Relationships become those that are only kept, 'until further notice'.[148] Society becomes a place where human bonds grow increasingly frail as long-term relational commitments decrease and, 'where few if any people continue to believe that changing the life of others is of any relevance to their own life'.[149]

Bauman's negative assessment of consumer society's impact on relationships is something that was keenly felt by the research participants, and it was absolutely clear from the research analysis that one motivation behind the aspiration to live more simply was the desire for enhanced relationships. When asked in the questionnaires briefly to sum up simplicity, two statements expressed this most clearly: 'being less tied up in consumerism with healthier relationships', and, 'attempting to create a more social, less affluent life, full of relationships and friendships, without the desperate need to have the latest tech or the best clothes'. One gets the impression that they are attempting to *solidify* their relationships, which they experience as being hard to maintain.

Linked closely with concern over fragmented relationships, Breathe participants also expressed concern that life is so busy and pressured that there is inadeqate time to cultivate those friendships. As Bauman says, 'consumption takes time', and, 'the sellers of consumer goods… are interested in cutting down as far as possible, or eliminating altogether, those necessary activities that occupy much time but bring few marketing profits'.[150] Thus we live in a society that trains us to focus on consumption, rather than activities that foster relationship (we will note below that the two may not actually be mutually incompatible). It was a feature of both questionnaires and interviews that the participants were active in their language, using phrases such as,

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[147] Ibid., 109.
[148] Z. Bauman, *Liquid Love*, 10, 41, 90.; *The Art of Life*, 15.
[149] Z. Bauman, *Liquid Times*, 24.
[150] Z. Bauman, *The Art of Life*, 5.

'considering carefully'; 'a deliberate decision'; 'consciously trying to find', and, 'being thoughtful, ethical and purposeful'. This points to an awareness by the Breathe members that simplicity involves resisting that training to consume by deliberately choosing frugality and focusing instead on cultivating community.

Although technology in its own right is not something that Bauman seems particularly concerned with, he does highlight the mobile phone – and in particular its texting function - as the embodiment of 'liquid modernity' with its ability to collect large numbers of social contacts without commitment; its ability then effortlessly to delete those contacts, and its pressure on owners to prevent themselves from being deleted by answering promptly.[151] This fear of being deleted reflects Bauman's reframing of the casualties of 'liquid modernity' as those who are *excluded* from the consumerism that is at the heart of 'liquid modernity'; a reframing that, in his later writings, he increasingly expresses as *human waste*.[152]

Two final points need to be underlined with respect to Bauman's understanding of 'liquid modernity'. Firstly, Bauman's discourse around *waste* extends beyond the human to the environmental implications of contemporary society. This focus is found particularly in *Consuming Life* where he talks about a culture of waste developing from wanting 'solid' goods that are kept 'for their comfort and esteem' to the need to buy ever increasing amounts of goods to satisfy the 'ever rising volume and intensity of desires'. The consumerist economy, therefore, 'thrives on the turnover of commodities, and is seen as booming when more money changes hands; and whenever money change hands, some consumer products are travelling to the dump'.[153]

The environmental implications of 'liquid modernity' are never a strong feature in Bauman's writings and his writings would benefit from deeper engagement with

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[151] Z. Bauman, *Liquid Love*, 35, M. Davies, *Freedom and Consumerism*, 69 – 70. It is surprising that Bauman has not extended this discussion to social networking sites such as FaceBook and Twitter and to the updating of mobile phones to smart phones.
[152] For 'exclusion' see particularly, *Work, Consumerism and the New Poor*. For, 'human waste' see, for example, chapter 4 of, *Consuming Life*.
[153] Z. Bauman, *Consuming Life*, 29, 36 – 37.

environmental critics of consumerism such as Wendell Berry.[154] Nonetheless, his comprehension of consumer society as a waste society resonates very much with the sentiments of the Breathe participants who, as we have seen, see the unsustainability of contemporary consumerism as something that cannot be ignored.

Secondly, in his later writings, there is an increasing emphasis on the failure of consumer society to satisfy. Although mentioned in *Consuming Life*[155], it is in *The Art of Life* that he explores this failure most fully, devoting a significant section of the Introduction to it. He questions the correlation between economic growth and increasing happiness, stating that we were wrong to choose such economic growth as the road to satisfaction.[156] Of course, Bauman recognises that the 'point' of consumerism is not ultimately to bring happiness, but to stimulate the desire and the search for happiness. After all, if happiness were reached then the consumer would stop consuming; something that must never be allowed to happen![157]

The illusionary nature of the happiness promised by consumerism – and hence the deeper life satisfaction brought by living a simpler life - is an issue that is constantly identified by the research participants. This was expressed by **A** who said, in describing simplicity,

> I think it's connected, it's an integral way of thinking about life, it can't just be that I have less stuff, it's that I want to think about something else behind the distractions. So I think it offers the church and Christianity a more compelling vision of life here in the here now and in the hereafter because it'll be a richer one. So it's going to be a richer eternal life as well as a more satisfying here-and-now life. It isn't simply a moral activity, it isn't simply about what we don't do, [it's] about embracing something much more fulfilling.

It is strongly felt that a better life is more possible when it is not focussed on consumer gain.

Reflecting the criticisms of the growth model of development earlier in this chapter, Breathe is thus part of a discussion around the relationship between economic

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[154] See, for example, W. Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community*.
[155] Pp. 44 – 46.
[156] Z. Bauman, *The Art of Life*, 2 – 3.
[157] Ibid. 9.

growth, ecological sustainability and life happiness, a part of which is the key question that we identified in the previous chapter of, 'how much is enough?'. This is something that the New Economics Foundation has particularly focused its work on, looking at how to combine high life expectancy, high life satisfaction and low ecological impact. In one study that it produced there was evidence to suggest that individuals with the smallest ecological footprints (in a developed, Western country) had similar levels of wellbeing to those with the largest. High levels of wellbeing did not correlate with high ecological footprints.[158]

This broad conversation has been usefully taken up by Druckman, Hirsh, Perren and Beckhelling in their work on a green Minimum Income Standard (MIS).[159] The MIS is the financial figure reckoned to be the minimum income needed by individuals and families in order to have an acceptable standard of living in the UK. Druckman et al's research takes the ecological footprint of the MIS and considers what lifestyle changes are needed in order to reduce that footprint. What is notable is that reducing an individual's footprint leads to a reduction in the MIS and hence economic growth becomes less of a necessity.

Returning to Bauman, the narrative that he has created around consumerism and 'liquid modernity' is eloquent and powerful and helpfully chimes with much of what we identified in our research analysis as being concerns held by the Breathe participants. We can learn much from it in terms of the negativities of contemporary society. In conclusion, however, we must sound a note of caution in how far Bauman's analysis is leant on.

One aspect of this concerns the tension that we noted earlier within the field of sociology: that of the conflict between macro-theories, which tend to be normative and not empirically grounded, and micro-theories, which arise entirely from empirical analysis but which are small-scale and hence lay no claim to generalisation. Bauman's work, although using some research to corroborate his diagnosis of contemporary culture, does not arise from it and hence is problematic in its substantiation. One

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[158] New Economics Foundation, *The (Un)Happy Planet Index 2*, 46 - 47.
[159] A. Druckman, D. Hirsch, K. Perren, and J. Beckhelling, 'Sustainable income standards: Possibilities for greener minimum consumption'.

wonders if it resembles the saying, 'we all hate Americans, except the ones we know'. Intuitively, his writings resonate, but when thinking of actual individuals – one's neighbour, perhaps, or family member – there seems a degree of dissonance between his prognosis and their real lives.

A large part of the problem is that Bauman is unrelentingly critical in his assessment of 'liquid modernity'. Jacobsen and Marshman see something else underlying his pessimism: they believe that the poetic style of his writing, resting as it does on metaphors ('solid', 'liquid', 'vagabonds', 'tourists', 'gamekeeping' and 'hunting'), is a rhetorical device that may contain within it, 'the seeds for political mobilisation and social transformation'.[160] As such, Bauman is viewed as writing deliberately provocatively in order to jolt us out of our complacency and motivate us to act. Davies, too, believes that Bauman always, 'manages to find hope as his final destination', although he also highlights his pessimistic worldview.[161] Nonetheless, that hope often feels hard to find, and the overwhelming impression of Bauman is deeply negative.

In contrast, Smart asserts that 'connectedness' is every bit as much a feature as 'individualization'. Her research leads her to move away from words such as fragmentation, differentiation, separation and autonomy, towards words such as connection, relationship, reciprocal emotion, entwinement, history and memory.[162] Certainly it was poignant that, as I was reading Bauman's analysis of the loss of social bonds, the residents of the most socially deprived road on the estate on which I live were collecting Tesco vouchers to give to a family whose husband was in hospital over Christmas.

Looking back at our third 'face' of globalisation – technology - Bauman's brief analysis of the mobile phone is a helpful example of where his negativity blinds him to any appreciation of the positive role that such devices might play. As we saw above, he views mobile phones (or, more appropriately today, smart phones) as illustrative only of 'thin' acquaintance. However, in a world of mobility such as he describes, they can

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[160] M.H. Jacobsen and S. Marshman, 'Bauman's Metaphors: The Poetic Imagination in Sociology', *Current Sociology* 56:5, 800.
[161] M. Davis, 'Bauman's Compass: Navigating the current interregnum', *Acta Sociologica* 52:2, 185, and, *Freedom and Consumerism*, 107 – 108.
[162] C. Smart, *Personal Life*, 189.

also function positively as part of the maintenance of 'thick' friendship. Technology thus can be used for good or for ill, as is well demonstrated by the contrast between the Egyptian protests for democracy and the riots in the UK in 2011, both of which used phones to organise and mobilise.

Smart phones are thus one example of how people use a variety of tools to make their lives work within 'liquid modern' society, and we have already noted that Breathe itself would not exist were it not for internet technology. In like fashion, we can see that the various actions that Breathe members take (e.g. reducing their expenditure, owning less things, considering their ecological impact) become mechanisms for helping *them* to make *their* lives work as Christians within the framework of recognising that they carry within themselves the identity of consumer.

I suggest, therefore, that Bauman's writings on 'liquid modern' society are very apposite, but that his consideration of how people respond within that situation is inadequately negative.[163] That evaluation does not, however, detract from the relevance of his appraisal of contemporary society; a conclusion reached also by Jay who states that, 'despite all the reservations one might have about the limits of his metaphorically driven narrative, it is hard to gainsay that many of the observations in *Liquid Modernity* still ring true a decade later, perhaps even truer'.[164] That his observations ring true for Breathe members and help to provide part of the framework within which they operate is also hard to gainsay.

3. The Ecclesiological Framework

We turn now to consider the specifically Christian character of Breathe and its members. It was a very notable feature of the empirical research that matters of faith play a strong role in motivating the desire to live more simply. Yes, participants were highly concerned with global, social and environmental issues, and yes, they were cognisant of the detrimental impact on themselves of living in a consumer focussed

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[163] He does, however, make the pregnant statement that, 'the chisels used by the artists of life ... in their engraving efforts are their characters', and that, 'between resigned acceptance and the bold decision to defy the force of circumstances stands character' (*The Art of Life*, 103 – 104).

[164] M. Jay, 'Liquidity Crisis: Zygmunt Bauman and the Incredible Lightness of Modernity', *Theory, Culture and Society* 27:6, 100 – 101.

society, but this nexus of awareness was clearly rooted in their understanding of faith and of what it meant to be a Christian.

Breathe stands at the intersection of a number of theological discourses:

(vi) The place of simplicity in a concern for issues of global poverty

(vii) The recovery of an environmental theology

(viii) The rediscovery of the 'ancient paths' of monasticism

(ix) The tradition of Christian simplicity and radical dissent

(x) Ecclesiology and Christian formation in consumer society

It is these developments that will occupy the remainder of this chapter, albeit in slightly briefer form than the preceding two main sections, because our next chapter will go on to focus more specifically on the theological issues raised by the research.

(i) The place of simplicity in a concern for issues of global poverty
As we have seen, Breathe members' attempts to live more simply arise partly from an understanding of the detrimental impact of globalisation on the lives of people around the world, leading as it does to unacceptable poverty and intense inequality. It is clear from the research that they believe concern for the poor has to be outworked in one's own life and that simplicity is a fundamental part of that. This is borne out when one considers the three texts that are mentioned the most frequently and that have been most formative in the development of their understanding of simplicity.

The most highly-mentioned book, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, is a classic in the Evangelical Church. Ron Sider first wrote it in 1977 and since then it has gone through five editions and sold hundreds of thousands of copies. Its purpose is very straightforward: to open Christian's eyes to the realities of what is happening in our world; to demonstrate that responding to issues of poverty (and also to environmental degradation, although his main emphasis is on human poverty) is thoroughly Biblical, and to call the Church to respond, giving various practical ideas

along the way. For many Evangelical Christians, reading *Rich Christians* signalled a defining moment in their lives.[165]

Sider makes a strong link between the massive injustices he reports and the need to respond by living more simply. So, he asks questions like, 'Dare we care at all about current fashions if that means reducing our ability to help hungry neighbours? Dare we care more about obtaining a secure economic future for our family than for living an uncompromisingly Christian lifestyle?', and his overall thesis is stated plainly when he says: 'We simply cannot continue these present economic patterns, *and* reduce global poverty, *and* preserve a liveable planet all at the same time. We could choose both justice for the poor and a liveable planet – but only if we give up rampant materialism and make hard choices to reverse environmental destruction'.[166]

Freedom of Simplicity, the second text, is written by one of Christianity's most widely read modern authors. Foster approaches simplicity from a broader perspective than does *Rich Christians* and his aim is to show that living a simple life is not just something that Christians do out of concern for current issues, but is 'a call given to every Christian': a call rooted in the Bible and lived out by 'all the devotional masters'.[167] Nonetheless, Foster emphasises the relevance that simplicity offers to contemporary society and the many struggles that it faces (and for him, coming from an Evangelical Christian perspective, this includes world evangelization), not least of which is global concerns. In his final chapter ('Corporate Simplicity: The World'), he sends out the clear message that, '*our undisciplined consumption must end*. If we continue to gobble up our resources without any regard to stewardship and to spew out deadly wastes over land, sea, and air, we may well be drawing down the final curtain upon ourselves'.[168] Simplicity is the key for Foster as he believes that, 'it is the Discipline of simplicity that gives us the basis for developing a strategy of action that

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[165] As is evidenced by the many responses expressing such a sentiment when I put up a post on FaceBook asking who had read the book and what they thought about it, in preparation for an article I wrote on the book for *Christianity Magazine*.
[166] R. Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, 184, 159.
[167] R. Foster, *Freedom of Simplicity*, 3.
[168] R. Foster, *Freedom*, 177 (italics his).

can address this and many other social inequalities. Individual, ecclesiastical, and corporate action can spring from the fertile soil of simplicity'. [169]

The Irresistible Revolution has become a mini-classic amongst certain groups of Christians in the last five years or so. Part of the New Monasticism movement, Claibourne is a young Christian radical, who uses examples from his own life (such as his peace visits to Iraq during the war; his time with Mother Theresa, and his galvanising a student movement that saved a group of homeless families from eviction), as well as from the lives of others, to pierce what he perceives to be the comfortable bubble of (US) Evangelical Christianity and turn it upside down: 'we can admire and worship Jesus without doing what he did. We can applaud what he preached and stood for without caring about the same things. We can adore the cross without taking up ours. I had come to see that the great tragedy in the church is not that rich Christians do not care about the poor but that rich Christians do not know the poor'.[170]

A founding member of the faith community, 'The Simple Way', Claibourne's life and words are an extended outworking of the call to simplicity that we have seen in the previous two books. As he says, 'simplicity is meaningful only inasmuch as it is grounded in love, authentic relationships, and interdependence. Redistribution then springs naturally out of our rebirth, from a vision of family that is larger than biology or nationalism. As we consider what it means to be "born again", … We must ask what it means to be born again into a family in which our sisters and brothers are starving to death'.[171]

These three texts, then, are seminal in the formation of our participants' comprehension of simple living, underscoring the bedrock of concern for global issues that they stand upon and their desire to respond with their own lifestyles.

(ii) A recovery of an environmental theology

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[169] R. Foster, *Freedom*, 4.
[170] S. Claibourne, *The Irresistible Revolution*, 113.
[171] S. Claibourne, *Revolution*, 163.

The Church in the UK has been through a remarkable shift in recent years in relation to its views on the environment. During the previous century, interest in the earth was primarily seen as the preserve of the 'Green Movement', which the Church viewed suspiciously as it did not come from a position of Christian belief and lent itself to Nature-worship. In addition, some Christians have held eschatological views that saw the earth as a doomed vessel to be escaped from rather than saved. However, as society at large has become more aware and interested in environmental issues, so the Church has looked afresh at what its own views are on the environment, recognising that it has become an unavoidable issue.

Of course, this is an issue that the Church is well placed not to ignore because of its fundamental beliefs that God is the creator of a world that is 'very good' (Gen. 1:31) and that 'the earth is the Lord's and everything in it' (Ps. 24:1). Indeed, it must not be forgotten that a broad sweep of church history shows that the Church has not always neglected the implications of this belief. Clement of Rome, Basil the Great, John of Damascus, John Scotus, Hildegard of Bingen, Meister Eckhart, Martin Luther and John Woolman are just some of the more well-known Christians who have written and spoken about God's wider creation, seeing it as 'a living icon of the face of God'.[172]

Nonetheless it is also true that the wider creation has not featured prominently in the thought and writings of recent church history and it is from this context that the plethora of both in recent years is so notable. Thus, an extensive body of literature has arisen that develops the understanding of an environmental Biblical theology.[173] Most recently, in the West at least, this writing has turned its attention to the overriding concern of climate change and how we should be thinking about, and responding to, it as Christians.[174]

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[172] John of Damascus (675-749), *Treatise*, cited in, 'Teaching on Creation through the Ages', in, *The Green Bible*, 101.

[173] A good overview of this literature can be found in C. Deane-Drummond, *Eco-Theology*. One of the most recent and comprehensive Biblical analyses is provided by R. Bauckham in, *Bible and Ecology: Rediscovering the Community of Creation*.

[174] E.g. M. Northcott, *A Moral Climate: The Ethics of Global Warming*, and N. Spencer and R. White, *Christianity, Climate Change and Sustainable Living*.

The Anglican Church –as the central denomination in the UK – provides a good illustration of the change that has occurred within mainline Christian thinking. Acknowledging that it has been slow to bring environmental concerns onto the main agenda, Rowan Williams has admitted that, 'the church was inheritors of a school of thought which did not see the environment as a good and appropriate environmental behaviour as a virtue'.[175] Things began to change in 1986 when the General Synod first debated environmental issues (there had been a brief mention in 1970), but it was not until 1998 that the Lambeth Conference adopted four principles on the environment, which included the principle that 'the covenant of God's love embraces not only human beings but all of creation'.[176]

The major piece of work on the environment conducted by the Church of England is the book, *Sharing God's Planet: a Christian vision for a sustainable future.*[177] This looks both at the current problems facing the world and then provides in-depth biblical and theological reflection, looking at the concepts of stewards, covenant and sacrament, and culminating in 'the Sabbath feast of enoughness'. This book has been the catalyst for the Church of England bringing the environment right into the heart of its agenda and initiating a number of schemes at a local level, the most prominent of which is its *Shrinking the Footprint* campaign.[178]

Breathe now operates within a national church context that, verbally at least, takes environmental issues seriously. It is striking that, in recent research on evangelical Christians in the UK, 94% of the more than 17,000 people surveyed agreed that, 'it is a Christian's duty to care for the environment'.[179] Mirroring the point that was made in the previous sub-section, the three formative books that we surveyed there also show that a consideration of one's own lifestyle is critical to responding to issues of unsustainability and ecological collapse.

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[175] Quoted in 2006 at
www.cofe.anglican.org/about/churchcommissioners/news/environment/resources.html/quanda.doc.
[176] www.cofe.anglican.org/info/ethical/policystatements/environment.pdf.
[177] The Mission and Public Affairs Council, *Sharing God's Planet: a Christian vision for a sustainable future.*
[178] See www.shrinkingthefootprint.cofe.anglican.org.
[179] Evangelical Alliance and Christian Research, *21st Century Evangelicals: A snapshot of the beliefs and habits of evangelical Christians in the UK*, 5.

iii. The rediscovery of the 'ancient paths' of monasticism

'The church's response to compromise and crisis has always been one of new monastic movements'.[180] This statement may be somewhat sweeping in its assertion, but The Modern Monk, Punk Monk, The Contemplative Network, Chasing Columba, Chasing Francis, The Contemporary Monk, Contemplative Activists, The New Monk Project, and many more such titles of books and blogsites demonstrate the intense interest today expressed by people within the Church for the monastic tradition, and that statement begins to point the way as to why this has developed. This interest is reflected in the Breathe participants too, as was seen in the questionnaire analysis in which the monastic tradition featured relatively highly as a resource that had been drawn on as part of participants' attempts to live more simply.

This monastic turn is perhaps not surprising given what we have already explored in our previous two main sections on the experience by individuals of the challenges and disorientations of globalisation and consumerism. In the Introduction to the revised rule of life by the Society of St John the Evangelist, the statement is made that, 'change is overwhelming society and the Church at an unprecedented rate, and it is easy to become paralyzed by the sense that everything has become provisional'.[181] The parallel between this sense of things being 'provisional' and Bauman's 'liquid modernity' is patent. The Introduction goes on to explain that the Society has decided to publish its rule because it addresses, 'deep issues of vocation, prayer, community and ministry that are common to Christians everywhere who are seeking to express the life of union with God in forms that are authentic for the beginning of the third millennium'.[182]

In our research analysis we noted Grigsby's theory of the Voluntary Simplicity movement in the USA; that simple living was one way by which predominantly white, middle class people could challenge the hegemony of consumerism. In this chapter we have explicated the problematic nature of consumerism as perceived by Breathe. The attraction of monasticism occurs in this context. With its emphasis on 'spirituality', its concern for the earth, its daily rhythm of prayer, its rootedness in community and its

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[180] Rutba House (Ed.) *School(s) for Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism*, ix.
[181] Society of St John the Evangelist, *Living in Hope*, xvi.
[182] Society of St John the Evangelist, *Living in Hope: A rule of life for today*, viii.

counter-cultural attitude towards money and possessions, it appears to offer a thick, rooted antidote to the fissiparity of modern life. When confronted with a terrain in which the life challenges faced by men and women have been, 'surreptitiously yet radically transformed, invalidating the extant life wisdom and calling for a more thorough revision and overhaul of life strategies', it is no surprise that individuals look backwards in search of those older life wisdoms in order to provide a more secure anchor.[183] This sentiment is nicely expressed by McLaren who says that the alternative path to what is offered by society, 'needs to derive strength from the old religious traditions; it needs to face new-age challenges with age-old wisdom. The challenge of the future will require, we realise, rediscovery and adaptive reuse of resources from the ancient past'.[184]

We will provide a more nuanced account in the following chapter of what place monastic ideals occupy in Breathe's understanding of simple living. For now, though, it is sufficient to note that the revival of interest in monastic forms of living has provided important tools for how Breathe participants are formulating their attempt to live more simply in consumer society.

iv. The tradition of Christian simplicity and radical dissent
The monastic tradition is an important part of the framework within which Breathe is located, but this is not exclusively so and Breathe stands within a long tradition of Christians living within culture yet in a manner that runs counter to the cultural norms, particularly regarding wealth and status. It is interesting to note that this is often accompanied by radical religious dissent. This tradition includes some forms of monasticism (it is notable that NM does not involve living away from society, but is concerned with living right in the midst of it) but extends much more broadly to encompass a whole range of movements that have occurred down through church history, starting with the early days of the Christian faith as a subversive, minority group who refused to acknowledge anyone as Lord except Jesus Christ and suffered the consequences for so doing . It is not the intention within this short sub-section to provide anything like a comprehensive overview of the many different forms that this

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[183] Z. Bauman, *Liquid Times*, 49.
[184] B. McLaren, *Finding Our Way Again: The Return of the Ancient Practices*, 5 – 6.

has taken and in the next Chapter we will return to the early Church. Here, I wish merely to highlight two forms.

Firstly, the early Quakers were a remarkable group who refused to pay attention to divisions of status and wealth. It is noteworthy that they arose not only as a protest against the religious hierarchy, but also against the socio-economic conditions of the day as several of the first converts in the 1640s had been in conflict with landlords over excessive rents and services. Thus, as Reay says, 'from the start, the Quaker movement was a movement of political and social as well as religious protest'.[185] They became known, amongst other things, for their refusal to remove their hats in the presence of nobility; their insistence on addressing all people as 'thee' and 'thou', although convention stipulated that a different mode of address pertained to the elite, and their preference for plainness in clothes, possessions and speech. The important thing, as George Fox said, was to, 'let your lives preach'.

Quakerism post-1660 is a complex phenomenon as the restoration of Charles II changed the political scene irrevocably and Quakerism went into a period of adjustment and institutionalisation.[186] Nevertheless, the foundations were laid for a movement that has played a significant role in the pursuit of social justice with the massive influence that it has had on society through the work of people such as Fry (both Elizabeth and Joseph Storrs), Rowntree and Cadbury and its pioneering role in the Abolitionist cause. Although related more to anti-slavery than to Quakerism specifically, the Abolitionists created one of the earliest examples of consumers using their purchasing power to push for ethical trade through their sugar boycott (including the Barclay family's development of beer as an alternative to gin) and can be seen as paving the way for the modern FairTrade concept.

Finally, a number of Breathe participants mentioned the influence of Latin American Liberation Theology on the development of their thinking. Liberation Theology was birthed out of the Latin American Catholic Church's attempts to apply the teaching of Vatican II to their own situation, one of mass suffering amongst the populations of

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[185] B. Reay, *The Quakers and the English Revolution*, 9.
[186] B. Reay, *The Quakers*, chapter 6, provides a fascinating account of this period.

Latin America, due to the failure of the economic development measures of the 1950s and the enforcement of national state security.[187] The Second General Conference of the Latin America Bishops in Medellin in 1968 provided its programmatic statement, with Gutierrez a central figure. Here, the principle was laid down that the church, 'must become not only a church *for* the poor, and not only a church *with* the poor: it must become a church *of* the poor'.[188]

Bearing in mind the deep concern for situations of social injustice expressed by the Breathe participants, and the strong accent that they place on community, it is easy to see why this emphasis on those who are poor, centred in the base ecclesial communities, might be so informative to them. Despite some protestations to the contrary (Pope John Paul II and the then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger were famously opposed), what Liberation Theologians such as Gutierrez were able to do was avoid using the Gospel as a platform for serving the interests of a social justice agenda. Instead they have demonstrated a holistic understanding that integrates the different threads together.

This can be seen in Gutierrez' discussion around the meaning of poverty, in which he differentiates between *material* poverty (which is, 'a scandalous condition'), *spiritual* poverty (which is, 'an attitude of openness to God and spiritual childhood') and then brings them together into *voluntary* poverty. Voluntary poverty - which he bases on the *kenosis* of Christ in Phil. 2: 6-11 - is about solidarity with the poor which, 'must manifest itself in specific action, a style of life, a break with one's social class'. In doing that, 'one can also help the poor and exploitated [sic.] to become aware of their exploitation and seek liberation from it.'[189] Reflecting on Gutierrez' distinctions, Goizueta makes the point that, 'a genuine spiritual poverty will necessarily manifest itself in a life of material simplicity'.[190] Although outworking their faith in a very different culture to Latin America, and making no pretence at embracing poverty,

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[187] T. Gorringe, 'Liberation ethics', in, R. Gill, *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Ethics*, 129. Clearly Liberation Theology is not a singular phenomena (we could more precisely refer to Liberation Theologies), even when restricted to the Latin American version, but for the sake of these brief paragraphs its differentiations are not being explored.
[188] R. Goizueta, 'Gustavo Gutierrez', in, P. Scott and W. Cavanaugh, *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, 290.
[189] G. Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, chapter 13 but especially pages 171 – 173.
[190] R. Goizueta, 'Gustavo Gutierrez', in, P. Scott and W. Cavanaugh, *Political Theology*, 292.

nonetheless there is a resonance here with our exploration in the preceding chapter around simplicity as sacrifice, not merely as a means to deeper happiness. It is transparent why these theologians have inspired some of the Breathe members.

Breathe, as we have noted earlier, may be a child of its time, but it does not appear out of nowhere and the two examples given above – whether recognised or not by Breathe members themselves – locate it within an established tradition of Christian simplicity and radical dissent.

v. Ecclesiology and Christian formation in consumer society
In our research analysis we saw that one of the challenges faced by the Breathe participants was how to relate their simple living to church life, realising that their approach seemed to create conflict with much of the British church. Their struggle with this tension locates them within a myriad of discussions around the church's role in consumer society.

One of the issues that arises is that of commodification: something that has already featured in this thesis. Miller extends his treatment on commodification to consider its relationship to the Church. Using the lens of such things as the music of Moby, Madonna's use of religious iconography, the general penchant for Tibetan prayer flags and the celebrity nature of the Pope and the Dalai Lama, he looks at how the symbols and practices of religion (both Christian and other) have been co-opted by consumer culture to serve consumerism's ends, abstracting them from their original referents.[191]

The point for Miller is not just to provide an interesting piece of cultural analysis, but to demonstrate that this directly influences those who profess a Christian faith. As we have seen, consumerism is not just a practice, but a value system that teaches one to view and relate to the world in a particular way, as consumers. Miller's contention is that this is neither conducive to Christian development nor to ecclesiology. The

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[191] Miller, *Consuming Religion : Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture.* Chapter 3.

concern is that Christians, 'engage religious beliefs and symbols with the interpretive habits and dispositions they use for commercial popular culture'.[192]

The crux of Miller's argument is that abstraction is the enemy of the Christian faith: 'the fundamental problem with the commodification of culture is that it trains believers to abstract religious doctrines, symbols, and practices from the traditional and communal context that give them meaning and connect them to a form of life'.[193] With Baumanesque echoes, these doctrines, symbols and practices thus become like colours on a palette that can be chosen to enhance one's *already-constructed life*, rather than being the framework around which one's life is shaped. The theme of forgetting echoes strongly here, as highlighted by Stephen Long and Tripp York who maintain that the practice of searching for the new and discarding the old is as apparent in Church theology and practice as it is in society in general. The result is that, 'we are all too willing to forget who we are for the sake of market shares'.[194]

This chapter has already highlighted the roles that technology and the media play in globalisation and consumerism. They feature again here because another issue for ecclesiology is the role played by technology and the media in forming us as people. Christian analysis of consumer culture has a tendency to view technology in wholly negative terms. Dawn, for example, draws on the work of Ellul and Borgmann to consider how our training as Christians takes place predominantly within the 'technological paradigm'. For her, this then shapes the way we perceive and live our lives: we value the end product more than the work involved, hence we despise common labours; we need constantly to be entertained, we fear silence and empty time, and we expect everything to be fast, new, time saving and focussed on ourselves.[195] Budde, similarly, contends that it is the global culture industries that play the biggest part in personal formation in this technological milieu. They therefore have a direct impact on Church life and Christian formation.[196] For Budde, it is a 'zero-sum game': 'to the extent that culture industry formation succeeds, Christian

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[192] Ibid. 73.
[193] Ibid. 195.
[194] D. Stephen Long and Tripp York, 'Remembering: Offering Our Gifts', in, Hauerwas, "The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics." 342.
[195] M. Dawn, *Unfettered Hope: A Call to Faithful Living in an Affluent Society*, 52-56.
[196] M. Budde, *The (Magic) Kingdom of God: Christianity and Global Culture Industries*,

formation fails', or, to put it more practically, 'time spent with television, recorded music [etc] is almost always time not spent being involved in the sorts of things that form people in practices and affections relevant to the radical demands of the gospel'.[197]

Dawn and Budde's arguments appear valid and the fact that culture competes with church as a location for formation – and generally more successfully – must be recognised.[198] Within that, though, the role of technology and the media remains *ambivalent* rather than purely negative. Breathe itself illustrates where technology can be used to foster positive formation. Budde's 'zero-sum game' does not actually work in practice.[199] Resonating with the concept of *instrumental materialism* that we noted in the previous chapter, the issue revolves around the appropriate use of technology and engagement with the culture industries.[200]

What is at stake here is what we might call our 'focal concerns': those priorities around which an individual orientates their practices. Dawn identifies hers as, 'love God, love our neighbour'; Cavanaugh identifies his as 'attachment' and Miller names his as 'engagement'.[201] In effect they say the same thing: consumerism detaches us from other people, and the most effective means of questioning that key cultural trait is actively to engage in ways of forming those lines of re-connection.[202] Our research findings would say that it is imperative to supplement this with an acknowledgement that 'our neighbour' includes our non-human neighbour (an implication which Dawn does not recognize) and must feature in our decision-making processes: as Wirzba

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[197] M. Budde, 'Collecting Praise: Global Culture Industries', in S. Hauerwas and S. Wells, *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, 124, M. Budde, *The (Magic) Kingdom of God*, 82.

[198] This point is also strongly made by Smith in, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*.

[199] In response to my posting Budde's quote about not watching television/listening to recorded music etc on FaceBook, one person responded, 'I engage with God and his concerns through watching telly, District 9 left me with more than enough issues to think about! And do I count the "wasted years" listening to protest music?'.

[200] To be fair to Dawn, she makes the same point herself (M. Dawn, *Unfettered*, 57).

[201] Ibid. 57. Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire*. 57. Miller, *Consuming Religion : Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture*. 184.

[202] Miller's overall thesis is broader than this too as he is also looking at the religious implications of consumer culture and the need to re-embed the various elements of church life (doctrine, prayers, symbols etc) in the Church's tradition and community.

says, 'we must learn to resist those practices that isolate us and turn us away from the earth'.[203]

Breathe epitomises this debate over the interpretation of 'appropriate' as they seek to hold in tension the fact that they operate almost exclusively via the media (website, blogs, youtube videos etc), with an acknowledgement that Christian formation that feeds only from these sources will be emaciated. As Miller says, 'commitments to visions of the spiritual life, no matter how profound, are difficult to sustain without a community of shared belief'.[204] This correlates with Bretherton's distinction between seeing consumerism as 'practice directed' rather than 'choice directed', as embedded within the everyday parameters of life.[205] Here we are brought back to the need for 'communities of engagement': ecclesial communities that form a counter-culture not through withdrawal exclusively, but also through engagement with public life in all its facets, including the economic and political.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter we have been seeking to elucidate what the different discourses are from which Breathe emerges. At its broadest, those discourses are twofold: societal and ecclesiological. When we break those down we discover a range of conversations taking place of which Breathe is a part.

The context of globalisation was the first to be discussed because of the heightened concern for global issues of social injustice and environmental breakdown articulated by the Breathe participants. We briefly developed some of the main problems facing the world and its inhabitants today before turning to an exploration of how to understand both globalisation and where Breathe fits into that cluster of concepts and issues. In particular, we looked at Beck's framing of contemporary society in terms of the Risk Society, focussing on its political implications and locating Breathe within the emergence of a global civil society.

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[203] Wendell Berry et al., *The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry* (Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 2002). Xviii.
[204] V. Miller, *Consuming Religion*, 106.
[205] L. Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics*, 180.

In part two, we concentrated our investigation on the cultural face of globalisation as experienced in the UK and looked at consumer society. This had been identified by participants as a key context within which they were attempting to live more simply: a context that they experienced very problematically and to which they saw their simple living as an antidote. Integral to our discussions were differentiated ways of comprehending consumerism which resonated with participants. Bauman's delineation of Liquid Modernity, whilst flawed, provided a helpful framework from which to gain a greater understanding of Breathe members' concerns with consumerism.

Thirdly, attention was turned to the specific church frameworks that have helped bring Breathe to these discussions. We looked at the place of simplicity and cultural dissent in the Christian life, both in terms of the role they play in responding to global issues today, and also in terms of their history. We saw that the link Breathe makes between simple living and the environment reflects recent developments in theology. The new interest in monasticism has contributed to a number of Breathe's discussions, not least around 'how much is enough?', and their desire for holism in how they live their lives. Finally, we recognised the role of the church as an alternative place of formation.

As this chapter comes to its close, it is helpful to note how Breathe members relate to the societal framework – both globally and more locally - and hence where we might locate simplicity. What emerges is a rhythm of engagement and withdrawal. Ethical consumerism, and Fair Trade in particular, is one of the key ways through which participants engage with the negatives of globalisation, using their power *as consumers* to bring about some benefit and counteract the immense damage done through the global trading system. We have seen repeatedly that participants are not interested in retreating from this world and its attendant problems, but see the way they live as a means of responding positively. Beyond ethical consumerism, participants are engaged in different ways in their global and local context, with talk about involvement in the Transition Towns movement and local community work. And of course, many Breathe members use their place of work as a place of engagement.

At the same time, another part of their response is to withdraw, finding ways to reduce their involvement in the system, in particular through reducing their expenditure and living frugally. We see it in the conscious decisions they make to give their time more to building relationships than to buying and consuming more goods and in their desire for space and stillness in which to deepen their relationship with God. This withdrawal is not in abject despair, but is seen by them as another way by which they respond to, and resist, their cultural context.

All of this emerges from their strong rooting in the Christian faith and their understanding of the Biblical material, which leads them to place such an emphasis on issues of care for others and wider creation care. Nonetheless, the rhythm that they seek to maintain brings with it some particular challenges and tensions, and it is to these and their theological outworkings that we turn in our next chapter.

CHAPTER 4

THINKING THEOLOGICALLY

Introduction

Over the duration of this thesis we have been constructing an account of Breathe, using them as a lens through which to investigate the notion of simple living and how it might function as a response to consumer society. Our empirical research has enabled us to move beyond theoretical – and perhaps aspirational - formulations of simplicity in order to gain an understanding of what it looks like to real people, seeking to perform the Christian faith in their given contexts. The previous chapter then explored in more depth the three key frameworks within which participants live and that have been formational in their desire to live simpler lives.

We are now ready to consider how we might provide a theological articulation for what Breathe members are attempting to do. One of the features that we have seen clearly throughout the research is that simple living is, for the participants, a Gospel imperative: it comes from their understanding of the Christian faith and of the demands that such a faith places on their lives. A simple life is, therefore, a fully theological engagement and, although the interviews only scratched the surface, this chapter aims to excavate that engagement more deeply through focussing on one particular aspect of the research findings: that of how simplicity seeks to hold together concern for self with concern for neighbour.

The previous chapter concluded with the observation that Breathe members live within a rhythm of engagement and withdrawal and that key to their understanding of simplicity is how they embrace this dynamism. As we turn to consider a theological framework we will see that, at the same time as inhabiting this movement, there are also a number of tensions that are held by contemporary Christians seeking to live simply in today's society. Indeed, the research has identified that there is a series of tensional relationships that Breathe members live within and through which they are trying to negotiate their way. I believe that these tensional relationships coalesce around two broad questions that participants are struggling with: (1) what is the

relationship of Christianity with consumer culture? And, (2) what is the relationship of the Christian faith with the material world? These questions, whilst inevitably interlinked, yet are distinguishable. They are also perennial questions, but Breathe members' attempts to live simpler lives is their way of trying to construct answers to those questions in such a way as will enable them to live faithful lives in the midst of contexts which they find inherently problematic.

It is in their articulation of simplicity as an answer to those broad questions that we can begin to explore the theological issues that swirl around their practice. In order to develop this chapter, therefore, we need, firstly, to look more deeply at the tensional relationships that our research participants stand in the midst of, and consider the polarities that Breathe members are trying to avoid. From this consideration we will then move to develop a theological framework that will enable us to make sense of what is taking place. We will do this through looking at the long tradition of discussion around happiness and well-being associated with Aristotle and Aquinas, a tradition which offers a theoretical language that will enable us both to interpret and frame the research findings, and will also facilitate the development of my own constructive propositions. In doing this I recognise that I am moving beyond the findings of the research to develop my own proposals, proposals with which my research participants may or may not agree. The question then of how my ideas might translate back into my own ecclesiological setting is something that will be considered in the thesis Conclusion.

As Part One unfolds it will become apparent that there are a number of different ways in which I might have moved into Part Two and developed the theological framework. For example, a focus on Hauerwas would have highlighted the issues around community and formation and how we can build 'communities of character' that enable the research participants to cope with the pressures of consumerism. At one stage I considered building my framework around Augustine and the debates over uti et frui and how he views the relationship between love of God, love of self, and love of others as a way of exploring the different aspects of simplicity that are of importance to Breathe.

However, my choice of Aristotle and Aquinas arose from the clear sense that emerges from the research that the participants are seeking to avoid polarities and instead are trying to walk a middle line, holding the tension between the different issues that we will outline in the following section. Thus the notion of the via media was something that I decided to explore as being potentially fruitful in helping to provide a richer understanding of what was taking place, particularly in Breathe's constant reiteration of the word 'enough'. This then led to a consideration of the concept of eudaimonia and of the virtuous life as providing the broader context for understanding the via media.

The questions that Aquinas is asking around the good life and happiness relate well to Breathe's articulation of the positive nature of simple living and of how simplicity can be about saying 'no' to unhelpful aspects of the acquisition of material goods in order to say a bigger 'yes' to relationship. The discussion around the interplay between the virtues of temperance and justice then concentrate on the tension within the research between simplicity being concerned with constructing a life of deeper well-being for the participants, and being about responding to the other, particularly on a global level. Aquinas' interest in issues around the global common good, whilst arising from a time very different to that of our research participants, thus enables us to make the link with the concern around issues of globalisation that emerged so strongly in the previous chapters. The choice of Aristotle and Aquinas thus arises from the ground of the research and has become a helpful way of bringing together many of the key themes that the research exposed.

Part One. Breathe's Tensional Relationships

Emerging from the research are a number of complexities that need exploring. We will do this by considering three dangers that each of these dialectics pose to Breathe members.

1. Therapeutic Christianity

In the 1960s a new movement impacted the British church, that of the Charismatic movement. With its roots in the Pentecostalism that had begun in the USA and thence spread throughout the world, the Charismatic movement brought the practice of

spiritual gifts into the mainline denominations, both Protestant and Catholic. At the same time that the effects of the Charismatic movement were expanding across, and being resisted by, various sectors of the established church, so also was being born what were first known as 'house churches', but are now referred to as the 'New Church movement'. With its large-scale nondenominational gatherings and programmes, the Charismatic movement effectively changed the face of the British – particularly Evangelical – Church.

The empirical research of chapter 2 highlighted that it is within this Charismatic, Evangelical context that Breathe members are ecclesiologically located, albeit occupying different places along the spectrum. They thus inherit some key theological traits that are pertinent to our discussion. Percy provides a useful gateway into these traits via his consideration of one of the most influential figures and groups in the Charismatic movement: John Wimber and the Vineyard churches. In particular, his analysis of Vineyard songs from the 1980's is illuminating.[206] He notes the distinctly personal and individualistic nature of the songs, such that just under half of them have 'I' in the first line. Rather than functioning as a doctrinal teaching device as did earlier hymns, the songs function to provoke experience, by the participant, of God. That experience is predominantly of two things: God's power and God's love, both of which are there to heal the participant's afflictions, whether they be physical or emotional.[207] The theological imaginary with which these songs work is thus of a God who, 'is personal, known, intimate and present, forever ready to show his love by meeting the needs of those who communicate with him'.[208]

Percy's analysis relates to songs that reflect the Vineyard of three decades ago and would not necessarily be a fair representation of songs sung by churches within the Vineyard or wider Charismatic movement. There has been much more emphasis in recent years on writing and singing songs that reflect a mixture of confession, reflection on Christ's sacrifice, an awareness of dark times, a call to justice and so on. Nonetheless, songs such as those on which Percy reflects have been foundational in

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[206] M. Percy, *Words, Wonders and Power: Understanding Contemporary Christian Fundamentalism and Revivalism*, chapter 4.
[207] Percy, *Words*, 64 – 65.
[208] Percy, *Words*, 75.

laying a modern Evangelical theology that interiorises and individualises Christian faith and sees a relationship with 'the Lord' as the gateway to having one's needs met. As Anderson says, 'Pentecostals and Charismatics relate the gospel directly to their troubles and the process of understanding the gospel essentially begins in the context of felt needs'.[209]

Ward continues this discussion, exploring the relationship between sung worship and British Evangelicalism since the 1950s, tracing the rise of charismatic worship such that it 'has become the default setting in most evangelical churches in Britain.'[210] He agrees with Percy that, 'the contemporary worship song occupies a particular space in charismatic spirituality: it is the means to a personal encounter with God'.[211] He cites hymnologist Adey's categorisation of hymns into three types: objective (which give an account of a biblical event or theological theme), subjective (which have similar content but also include the relevance of this for the participants), and reflexive (which focuses on the act of worship itself) and notes that worship songs have changed over recent decades to become predominantly reflexive.[212] Although there have been important strides taken in recent years to overcome these deficiencies, still they reflect an Evangelical culture that has its focus on 'me and my relationship with Jesus'.

From where does this turn to the inner self come? Anderson, in his analysis of Pentecostalism, traces it back to the Holiness Movement, which in itself drew on earlier German Pietism.[213] The Pietist movement reacted against the formalism of the established church and emphasised the importance of a personal experience of God, evidenced through 'new birth' by the Holy Spirit. This stream came into contact with revivalism in America, which 'stressed the role of the emotions in changing lives'.[214]

The relevance of this to our thesis becomes apparent when we consider that the roots of the ecclesiological context within which Breathe are operating are located in the

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[209] A. Anderson, *An Introduction to Pentecostalism*, 229.
[210] P, Ward, *Selling Worship: How what we sing has changed the Church*, 1.
[211] Ward, *Selling Worship*, 198.
[212] Ward, *Selling Worship*, 206 – 207.
[213] Anderson, *Pentecostalism*, 25 – 27.
[214] Anderson, *Pentecostalism*, 28.

same historical period as, it is argued, are the roots of contemporary consumerism. In Campbell's groundbreaking work, he contends that it was the place of aesthetics and the Romantic Movement that transformed the Protestant work ethic into a consumer ethic.[215] Since, 'consumerism justified everything which Puritanism condemned', what is most remarkable is that the consumer revolution was carried through precisely by those sections of English society – the middle classes – that had the strongest roots in Puritanism and so should have been those most likely to disapprove of the new demand for 'luxury goods' and 'pleasurable indulgencies'.[216]

Campbell's key points build on his understanding of the development of a modern form of hedonism that differentiates from traditional hedonism by way of being focused predominantly on the emotions and the imagination (Campbell has much to say about the role of daydreaming and fantasising in consumerism[217]), rather than on bodily, tactile pleasures.[218] Campbell's view is that this arose from a disenchantment with the Calvinist doctrine of Predestination which led to a more individualistic approach to life and the development of what he has called, 'the Man of Feeling'.[219] He traces the rise of consumerism from Puritanism, through Sentimentalism and into Romanticism, and sees consumerism as the attempt to bring to reality that which is fantasised about in the act of daydreaming.

Campbell's work is very involved and the details of it do not need to detain us here.[220] What is germane to our discussion is that the rise of modern charismatic Evangelicalism, within which Breathe stands, takes place at the same time as the increasing introspection of the modern individual. We must be careful here not to posit too close a relationship between Evangelicalism and Romanticism: and Bebbington has argued that Evangelicals were influenced more by the Enlightenment.[221] Nevertheless, Campbell has shown that there was a counter side to

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[215] C. Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism*.
[216] P. Sedgwick, *The Market Economy and Christian Ethics*, 3; C. Campbell, *Romantic Ethic*, 31.
[217] See particularly his discussion in chapter 5.
[218] Campbell, *Romantic Ethic*, chapters 4 and 5.
[219] See, for example, p. 140.
[220] And he has refined his thesis in the years since his work was first published (see, for example, his introduction to, P. Falk and C. Campbell (Eds.) *The Shopping Experience)*.
[221] D. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History From the 1730s to the 1980s*, 50 – 55, 80 – 81.

the Enlightenment and its 'age of reason' as, 'the process of disenchanting the world served both to permit and to prompt the accompanying voluntaristic re-enchantment of experience'. The result is that, 'the Age of Reason was also necessarily the Age of Sentiment'.[222] With its tendency to absorb and reflect the culture of which it is a part, it would not be unexpected to see Evangelicalism following suit as the Protestant Work Ethic became the consumer ethic.

All of this has an impact on our research participants and we find ourselves in the situation today in which, what Gregory has described as, 'the increasing self-absorption displayed in a rights-governed and consumer-oriented liberal culture', poses a distinct danger to Breathe members in their incorporation of the ideal of simple living.[223] The danger is that the pursuit of a more simple life stems solely from the desire to construct a more self-fulfilling life to the detriment of the wider concerns that we have identified throughout the research. That this danger is not purely theoretical is evidenced in what we have already observed in relation to *Consumer Detox*, and it is notable too in other more recent popular-level Christian books written to facilitate the adoption of a more simple life as an antidote to consumerism.

One such example is Draper's most recent book, which aims to respond specifically to the, 'frenetic and frenzied culture of the West today' - to the 'consumer world in which we endlessly pursue more things' – by encouraging us to stop, breath, listen and ask, 'how can we simply live?'.[224] The answers are all to be found by doing little, simple things that will improve one's quality of life: things such as the practice of, 'contemplating "ordinary" objects, to slow myself down and sharpen my focus within this present moment', and learning to, 'stop wishing my life away, and settle in more fully to the unfolding rhythms of each day'.[225]

Much of what Draper says is to be commended, and resonates with our discussion in the previous chapter around the problems that Breathe members perceive within consumer society and the impact that those problems have on their own lives and

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[222] Campbell, *Romantic Ethic*, 138.
[223] E. Gregory, *Politics and the Order of Love: An Augustinian Ethic of Democratic Citizenship*, 369.
[224] B. Draper, *Less is More: Spirituality for Busy Lives*, taken from the back cover.
[225] Draper, *Less*, 165

sense of well-being. Withdrawal from the negative impacts of consumerism is thus well represented by Draper. But it ultimately disappoints because the other aspect of Breathe's rhythm - engagement - is only present very scantily.[226] There is a wholesale failure to get engaged with the broader issues of justice and inequality with which individuals are presented by consumerism. The irony, therefore, is that what ostensibly appears to provide a response to consumerism actually stems from the therapeutic preoccupation with self that is writ so large within consumer culture.

Our research has already noted that this is an area of some tension for Breathe. Initially it appeared that living more simply resulted in a increased quality of life with, as we saw, words such as 'freedom', 'joy', 'light', 'abundant' and 'rich' being used liberally. But closer examination through the interviews uncovered the recognition that it was also a sacrifice as limits were imposed on self in order to live lives that were less damaging environmentally and socially. The notion of a therapeutic underpinning to simplicity – the desire to build a better life for oneself, away from the trappings of 'stuff' - is thus held in tension with the desire to respond to injustice and environmental breakdown, which will of necessity lead to a less materially comfortable life. What is the relationship between these two desires: are they mutually exclusive, or can they be reconciled and, if so, how?

ii. World-Denial and Attitude Towards Material Goods
Standing as a counterpoint to the therapeutic approach to consumerism is the second danger facing our research participants: that of a rejection of material goods such that notions of well-being are jeopardised. As we have seen, Breathe members operate within an oppositional rhetoric that places 'stuff' in an antithetical position to all that is perceived as good: knowing God and living in community with other people and the wider creation. The word 'stuff' thus functions as a metaphor for a particular understanding of material goods; one that is essentially negative and distrustful. However, a precise definition of what counts as 'stuff' is harder to articulate and, on closer examination, the practical outworking of this view reveals a more multifarious understanding.

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[226] For example, he does encourage his readers to pledge, 'to tread lightly; to assess my carbon footprint, to consider the mark I leave as I go', and to look to do things that will, 'touch at least one other soul' (pp 166 – 167).

Asceticism

We have noted already in our research that many of the Breathe members identify the monastic movement, both past and present, as being formational in their understanding of simplicity and, in Chapter 2, it was commented that they drew inspiration from the deep tradition of Christian asceticism. The notion of Christian asceticism itself, though, is a contested concept with no clear agreement on its definition. Ziesler distinguishes asceticism from renunciation per se. In his discussion of the three 'classic' renunciations – sex, property and food – he states that such renunciations may happen for a number of different reasons (such as choosing a poorly paid job out of a sense of calling, or forgoing a meal as an act of solidarity with others). Asceticism, however, is purely that renunciation that is undertaken 'due to a concern about one's relation with God', or, what Tolbert would describe as, 'self-inflicted discipline for the betterment of the soul'.[227] Ziesler then differentiates two primary motivations for asceticism, the first arising from a dualistic world-view, which believes that, 'the body and all physical things are in themselves evil, imprisoning, and obnoxious'; the second located in Roman Catholic ascetical theology, which sees renunciation as an essential discipline in the search for union with God.[228] Ziesler's view is that neither is in line with Biblical theology.

However, asceticism need not be so restricted. Kallistos Ware, for example, describes asceticism as that which, 'leads us to self-mastery and enables us to fulfil the purpose that we have set for ourselves, whatever that may be. A certain measure of ascetic self-denial is thus a necessary element in all that we undertake, whether in athletics or in politics, in scholarly research or in prayer'. Similarly, Vaage defines asceticism as, 'a certain disciplinary techno of the body as the specific means deemed most likely to permit the achievement of a stipulated end.'[229]

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[227] J. Ziesler, *Christian Asceticism*, 4 – 5; M.A. Tolbert, 'Asceticism and Mark's Gospel', in, L. Vaage and V. Wimbush, *Asceticism and the New Testament*, 45.
[228] Zielser, *Christian Asceticism*, 5 – 7.
[229] Kallistos Ware, 'The Way of the Ascetics: Negative or Affirmative?' in, V. Wimbush and R. Valantasis (Eds.), *Asceticism*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) 3, and, L. Vaage, 'Ascetic Moods, Hermeneutics, and Bodily Deconstruction: Response to the Three Preceding Papers', in, Wimbush and Valantasis, *Asceticism*, 260, both cited in, A. Saldarini, *Asceticism and the Gospel of Matthew*, in, Vaage and Wimbush, *New Testament*, 14 - 15.

A sociological framework introduces an interesting dynamic. Writing on asceticism in the Pauline letters of Colossians and Ephesians, MacDonald highlights Wimbush's reflection on asceticism in the Graeco-Roman period that, 'ascetic behavior represents a range of responses to social, political, and physical worlds often perceived as oppressive or unfriendly, or as stumbling blocks to the pursuit of heroic personal or communal goals, life styles, and commitments'.[230] Using social scientific theories of power, Valantasis reflects this mood when he defines asceticism as, 'performances within a dominant social environment intended to inaugurate a new subjectivity, different social relations, and an alternative symbolic universe'.[231]

Although it was suggested in Chapter 2 that Breathe's attempts to live more simply could not be described as ascetic in and of themselves, our discussion here has shown that there are deeper complexities. Where asceticism can be described as renunciation in order to achieve some larger purpose (as in Ware's assertion above) we can rightly discern resonance with Breathe's practices, reflecting their desire to divest themselves of any 'stuff' that impedes their communion, with God and others. The subversive, socially-resistant nature of asceticism, too, chimes with our research findings and the sense that Breathe members are endeavouring to withstand the hegemony of consumer culture. Ascetic behaviour can be a way of maintaining some sense of control in a society that appears to have let its consumer habits run out of control.

However, asceticism as a word may yet be fraught with too many ambiguities for it ultimately to be a helpful designation for Breathe's relationship with 'stuff'. Despite the attempt to broaden it out, Christian asceticism would still seem ultimately to be about physical renunciation with the aim of 'perfecting oneself to make oneself worthy of salvation'.[232] This demonstrates congruity with the consultation on monastic spirituality coming out of the World Council of Churches. The report

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[230] V. Wimbush (Ed.), *Ascetic Behavior in Greco-Roman Antiquity: A Sourcebook* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 2, cited in, M. MacDonald, 'Asceticism in Colossians and Ephesians', in, Vaage and Wimbush, *New Testament*, 270.
[231] R. Valantasis, 'Constructions of Power in Asceticism', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 63 (1995), 797, cited in, MacDonald, 'Asceticism in Colossians and Ephesians', in, Vaage and Wimbush, *New Testament*, 270.
[232] Tolbert, 'Mark's Gospel', in, Vaage and Wimbush, *New Testament*, 39.

describes the monastic life as a life of conversion, but characterises this conversion as involving, 'both asceticism, in which [the monks] leave behind the flesh, which is subject to the powers of evil in this passing world..; and also a movement of their whole being towards Him who invites us into His Kingdom. Monastic vows evidence this dual process of leaving behind the world and responding to the divine invitation'.[233]

Tolbert may be correct to perceive the contemporary use of asceticism to describe such practices as reducing the hours spent watching television as, 'a metaphorical use of asceticism that draws the power it has from the concrete, historical phenomenon of ascetic practice'.[234] Nonetheless, the worldly rejection evidenced above by the WCC consultation is a far cry from the attitude to material goods coming from our research. We have evinced a distinct tension in the research findings and an uncertainty as to how to relate to money and possessions, reflecting the rhythm of engagement and withdrawal: on the one hand, material goods are a positive aspect of well-being and are both to be embraced and used for the benefit of others; on the other hand, material goods are a negative distraction from that which really matters in life. Where might we go to find help with this? The research participants themselves cite a variety of influences. Liberation Theology is one such influence, and we highlighted that in our previous chapter. Alongside Liberation Theology stand two others which have shown themselves to be particularly informative: the example of the early church and, once again, the example of monasticism. It is instructive, therefore, to consider the different attitudes to poverty and material goods exhibited by the Christians of the first period of the Church (i.e. the pre-Constantinian era), and by two of the key influences within the monastic movement: St. Benedict and St. Francis.

The Early Church

Hengel's designation of 'love communism' as a descriptor of the very first Christian communities provides a helpful insight into their way of life, based on Biblical

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[233] World Council of Churches, *A Spirituality for Our Times: Report of a Consultation on Monastic Spirituality*, 9.
[234] Tolbert, 'Mark's Gospel', in, Vaage and Wimbush, *New Testament*, 31.

passages such as Acts 2:42 and 4:32-37.[235] Whilst what this meant exactly - and for how long it continued - is more disputed, what is clear is the outstanding care and compassion undertaken by the church of the first centuries of Christianity. It is well known that both Christians and pagans wrote of this particularly noteworthy feature of the early church, with the pagan emperor Julian acknowledging towards the end of this period that, 'the impious Galileans support not merely their own poor, but ours as well', and Justin, towards the beginning of the second Century, providing this moving description of a local Christian assembly:

> On the day which is called the day of the sun [they meet] to pray and read and to celebrate the Eucharist, at the conclusion of which the deacons take the Eucharistic elements to those unable to be present, presumably through reasons of sickness or imprisonment, whilst the rest of the congregation … give what they will, each after his choice. What is collected is deposited with the president, who gives aid to the orphans and widows and such as are in want by reason of sickness or other cause, and to those also that are in prison, and to strangers from abroad; in fact to all that are in need, he is a protector.[236]

Overall, the picture is gained of a Church very involved in caring for the extensive needs of those around it, both within and without its boundaries. However, as the church increasingly reached into the upper echelons of Greek society, the impression is also given of a struggle to determine the place of riches within the Christian life. On the one hand, there was the acknowledgement, even from as strident a person as Tertullian, that God can, 'grant riches', because, 'with them many works of righteousness and philanthropy can be achieved'.[237] Indeed, the amount of care provided by the Church presupposes a certain amount of disposable private property. On the other hand, there was the recognition that wealth brings many dangers and can blind one to the needs of the poor rather than being a means of alleviation. John Chrysostom is famous for preaching against the 'greed and the arrogance of the rich', but he was far from being a lone voice in the early centuries of the church.[238] The ubiquity of this theme through such well-known writings as the Didache, the

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[235] M. Hengel, *Earliest Christianity (Containing: 'Acts and the History of Earliest Christianity', and, 'Property and Riches in the Early Church')*, 179 – 182.

[236] D. Batson, *The Treasure Chest of the Early Christians: Faith, Care and Community from the Apostolic Age to Constantine the Great*, 90, 62.

[237] Tertullian, *Adv. Marc.* 4, 15, 8, cited in, Hengel, *Earliest Christianity*, 210.

[238] J. Gonzalez, *Faith & Wealth: A History of Early Christian Ideas on the Origin, Significance, and Use of Money*, 205. See also, M. Mitchell, 'Silver Chamber Pots and Other Gods Which Are Not Good: John Chrysostom's Discourse Against Wealth and Possessions', in, W. Schweiker and C. Mathewes, *Having: Property and Possession in Religious and Social Life*.

Shepherd of Hermas, Clement of Alexandria and the Cappadocian Fathers testifies to the presence of wealthy Christians who were precisely *not* living according to the ideal set out in Acts 2 and 4; something which was distinctly problematic to the early church.

Amongst the many different writings on the question of riches throughout the period of the early church, two themes clearly emerge, both of which are pertinent to our research. The one is that material goods and riches are not evil in themselves. This theological position was crucial to the combating of Gnosticism, illustrated in Clement of Alexandria's writing on wealth. A strong doctrine of creation mitigated against the world-denial of the philosophical ascetics and meant that physical, created things were viewed as good and to be valued, not discarded. Writing about the 'rich young ruler' in Matthew 19: 16-30, Clement is at pains to distance himself from such asceticism, asserting that Jesus, 'does not, as some conceive off-hand, bid him throw away the substance he possessed, and abandon his property; but bids him banish from his soul his notion about wealth, his excitement and morbid feeling about it, the anxieties, which are the thorns of existence, which choke the seed of life'.[239] This does not mean, though, that wealth itself is unimportant, rather it is to be seen as a tool which is, 'itself destitute of blame... Are you able to make right use of it? It is subservient to righteousness. Does one make wrong use of it? It is, on the other hand, a minister of wrong'.[240] Thus the second theme is that whilst wealth and material goods are not in themselves evil, the imperative is that they are only given for the sake of others: 'owners of property or wealth should use for themselves only enough to meet their needs. What surpasses the measure of sufficiency is superfluous and should be shared with others whose primary needs are not being met'.[241]

In his evaluation of the Christian communities of the second and third centuries, Hengel writes that 'possessions acquired a contradictory aspect. They were regarded simultaneously as a dangerous threat and a supreme obligation.'[242] This mirrors precisely the tension that we have observed in Breathe's understanding of material

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[239] Clement, *Quis dives salvetur? – Who Is the Rich to be Saved?*, 11, cited in, Gonzalez, *Faith & Wealth*, 112.
[240] *Quis div. salv.* 14, in, Gonzalez, *Faith & Wealth*, 113.
[241] Gonzalez, *Faith & Wealth*, 228.
[242] Hengel, *Earliest Christianity*, 217.

goods. Despite its attraction, the 'love communism' of the very earliest days was not something that was able to be continued in the regular life of the church.[243] At the same time, Christianity's rootedness in the Jewish doctrine of creation and the necessity of counteracting the dualism of the Gnostic threat ensured that material goods and private property earned a legitimate – if uneasy – place. Compromise, therefore, was sought in an understanding of 'proper usage': a concept to which we shall return in our consideration of Aquinas.

Monasticism is a sphere to which Breathe members have also looked for guidance in their thinking on the place of material goods in the Christian life, and we see that ambivalence manifests itself here too, albeit in different guises, as evidenced in the different understandings brought into operation by St Benedict and St Francis.

St. Benedict

Although the Desert Fathers and Augustine had ensured that monasticism was already well established by the time of Benedict, it is his Rule - and the Order that arose from it - that is widely regarded as the most influential in the Western tradition. Two features are of note for our present concerns. The first is that Benedict wished to bring moderation into the monastic way of life that had been founded on the extreme rigorisms of the Desert Fathers. As he said, his aim was to 'establish a school for the Lord's service' and to provide guidance that was not 'harsh or burdensome'.[244] His was not the way of harsh austerities and bodily deprivations: instead he prescribed sufficient clothing, food and sleep for the monks. Benedict's definition of 'sufficient' appears severe in a contemporary context (such as only having two tunics), but the likelihood is that it would have resulted in conditions that were not much harder than the daily experience of many entering his communities.[245] This sense of moderation is encapsulated by Butler who describes Benedictine virtue as, 'that keeping of the happy mean between rigorism and laxity'.[246]

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[243] Although Gonzalez sees it continuing at least well into the second century and in some forms throughout most of the third (Gonzalez, *Faith & Wealth*, 226).
[244] P. Barry(trans.), *St Benedict's Rule: A New Translation for Today*, 4.
[245] C. Butler, *Benedictine Monachism: Studies in Benedictine Life and Rule*, 32.
[246] Butler, *Benedictine Monachism*, 152.

At the same time, however, Benedict's views on private property were uncompromising: 'those in monastic vows should not claim any property as their own exclusive possession – absolutely nothing at all, not even books and writing materials. After all they cannot count even their bodies and their wills as their own, consecrated, as they are, to the Lord'.[247] Benedict based his commands on his particular understanding of the 'love communism' of the early church in Acts; seeing the phrase, 'and they held all things in common', as teaching against personal ownership. Instead, ownership resided in the monastic community, which would thereby supply, 'everything they need in their lives'.[248]

The difference between this and the Fransiscan view of poverty is helpfully illuminated by Dom Cutler's reminiscence of the late Bishop Augustine O'Neill's insight into Benedictine poverty. He talks of how the different phases of Christ's life lead to different kinds of poverty:

> There was the utter destitution of Calvary; there was the poverty almost as great of Bethlehem; there was the poverty of the public life, when at times He had not where to lay His head; and there was also the poverty of Nazareth. Calvary is the type of Franciscan poverty; but Nazareth is the type of Benedictine poverty. It was not the poverty of beggary, but the poverty that obtains in the household of a carpenter or other skilled artisan. It is simplicity and frugality, rather than want.[249]

St. Francis

St Francis thus had a very different approach to money and possessions. Where the early church deemed it appropriate to have personal property, so long as it be used to meet the needs of others, and Benedict deemed communal property appropriate, but not private property, Francis denied legitimacy to any ownership whatsoever, whether private or communal. Theologically, he based his views on the kenotic poverty of Christ expressed in, for example, Philippians 2:5-11 and 2 Corinthians 8:9. Christ's homeless poverty, Francis believed, was an example that should be followed

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[247] *St. Benedict's Rule*, 40.
[248] *Rule*, 41.
[249] Butler, *Benedictine Monachism*, 149-150.

literally, as were Jesus' instructions to his disciples to take nothing with them when they went out to preach.[250]

Francis thus rejected both the familial wealth of his upbringing and the traditional monastic life in order to renounce material goods altogether and identify his life (and thence of his followers) with the kenotic Christ. Crucially, these actions are not so much seen as arising from a world denying asceticism as from the desire – once again following Christ's example – to see the salvation of others, particularly the economically marginalised.[251] Contrary to the early church – and of course living in a very different time; one that was witnessing the rise of the money economy[252] - Francis only saw wealth and money as a hindrance to that goal.

To conclude this section, our brief analysis of two of the key theological influences on Breathe members has shown that the tension they experience with regards to material goods in a consumer age is in many respects playing out a tension that has been wrestled with by the Church since its very earliest days. The challenge for our research participants is to steer away from a world denying anti-materialism, whilst at the same time avoiding the other extreme of embracing material goods uncritically. The examples we have considered provide us with instances of the paths that others have chosen to take. Like St Francis, many of the Breathe participants locate their views in the life of Jesus and also articulate an understanding of the kenotic, although for them Jesus lived a simple life rather than one of destitute poverty.[253] Like St Benedict, our research participants are seeking to find a middle way between 'rigorism and laxity', although they have no qualms with private property. And, like the early church, they too emphasise the importance of using material goods well, for the benefit of others, although their understanding extends also to the wider creation. Breathe's emphasis on reducing expenditure and consumption therefore stems not from a rejection of material goods per se, but from a frustration that a focus on

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[250] W. Short, *Poverty and Joy: The Franciscan Tradition*, 60-61; M. Robson, *St Francis of Assisi: The Legend and the Life*, 94; K. Johnson, *The Fear of Beggars: Stewardship and Poverty in Christian Ethics*, 31.
[251] Short, *Poverty and Joy*, 67; Robson, *St Francis of Assisi*, 109, 112.
[252] Johnson, *Fear of Beggars*, 28-31.
[253] For example, **K** asks, 'how did Jesus live? Well he didn't live in a rich materialistic way', and she goes on to talk about, 'the example of Jesus, that he lived a life of being the King of Kings and yet was born in a stable and lived life as a carpenter'.

material goods acts as a distraction from developing one's relationships and helping people and places that are in need. These various strands of thought cohere for them around the concept of 'enough', but from where does that arise theologically and how does one determine how much is enough?

iii. An Oppositional Enclave

The third tensional area that Breathe members find themselves in is that of their relationship to the wider society around them and the danger of retreating into an oppositional enclave. We have seen already throughout the research that participants have found much to inform their thinking on simplicity within the monastic tradition, but this also brings its own challenges and extremes from which to steer away.

The roots of monasticism undoubtedly lie in its separation from the general society. The extraordinary lives of the Desert Fathers and Mothers provide the type for this, giving Christian definition to the concept of *anachoresis*, which, as Lacarriere states, 'signifies avoidance of the world, renunciation of the society of men and the adoption of a life of solitude'.[254] These anchorites were not the first people to flee from Egyptian society: the desert was a place where the outlaws went, those peasants, slaves and thieves who were escaping the taxes and laws of Graeco-Roman Egypt. It also became a refuge for thousands of Christians escaping persecution.[255] But from the fourth century onwards the desert took on a new identity as the locale for escaping the values of the present, sinful world, which were seen as a distraction from one's relationship with God. In the desert, 'one remains alone with God – the Other who knows all things – and thus through Him can turn inwards to contemplate and study oneself'.[256]

This is exemplified in the description given in the collection of lives and sayings of the Desert Fathers called *Vitae Patrum*, and collated by Rosweyde in the early seventeenth century, of a place in the desert called Cellia:

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[254] J. Lacarriere, *The God-Possessed*, 15.
[255] Lacarriere, *God-Possessed*, 15-16.
[256] S. Ramfos, *Like a Pelican in the Wilderness*, 12.

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> To this spot those who have had their first initiation and who desire to live a remoter life, stripped of all its trappings, withdraw themselves: for the desert is vast, and the cells are sundered from one another by so wide a space that none is in sight of his neighbour, nor can any voice be heard. One by one they abide in their cells, a mighty silence and a great quiet among them.[257]

And the sentiment of the Desert Fathers is encapsulated in the reply that Arsenius gave to the abbot Marcus who asked him, 'wherefore does thou flee from us?'. The old man is said to have replied, "God knows that I love you: but I cannot be with God and with men"'.[258]

Whilst the desert dwellers of the fourth century, both anchoritic and cenobitic, laid the original foundations for Christian monasticism, subsequent forms did not follow precisely in their footsteps. The previous section illustrated divergent views on the relationship to the material world, and this is no less the case in relation to the social and cultural world. Immediately apparent is St Francis' rejection of the dominant Benedictine monasticism, precisely because it was based on cloistered communities that separated themselves from 'the world', whereas, as previously noted, his aim was to rid himself of all encumbrances in order to take the Gospel of Christ *into* the world. Augustine's decision – undertaken whilst the desert monastics were still very much a feature of the Christian world – not to form a community in the desert but to be located conspicuously in the heart of the city of Hippo Regius (first at the 'garden monastery' within the church compound and then as part of the Bishop's residence), authenticates the view that the desert approach was not the only one.[259] This is the very antithesis of Arsenius' withdrawal from the city into the desert and his conviction that, 'the city was following him into the desert, nibbling away at the inward conversion that had induced him to abandon it', and demonstrates that monasticism's relationship with the world at large cannot be quantified too simplistically.[260]

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[257] H. Waddell (trans.), *The Desert Fathers: Translations from the Latin*, 9.

[258] Waddell (trans.), *The Desert Fathers*, 10. Care should be taken not to give the impression that the desert dwellers were only interested in solitary living. For an approach that emphasises the communal dimension of the Desert Fathers, see G. Gould, *The Desert Fathers on Monastic Community*. Nonetheless, whether on alone or with others, the point remains that they retreated from 'the world'.

[259] T. Martin, 'Augustine and the Politics of Monasticism', in, J. Doody, K. Hughes and K. Paffenroth, *Augustine and Politics*, 167 – 169.

[260] S. Ramfos, *Pelican*, 12. Modern monasticism too shows this divergence, from the withdrawal of monks to the remote Mt. Athos, to the urban immersion of the Columban Fathers.

Despite these variations, however, the overall tenor of monasticism entails separation from the wider community. This creates a conspicuous incongruity with Breathe members, all of whom live 'regular' lives within contemporary society: as teachers, vicars, charity workers and so on. About half of the interviewees are married with children; none of the others indicated that they had chosen a permanently celibate way of life. All of them (vicars excepted) live in conventional housing with rents or mortgages to pay. Their relationship with the broader society is therefore much closer than that of the monastics and there is thus a requirement for them to forge their own way through it.

Adding to the complexity is the reality that an oppositional enclave does not only emerge from living a cloistered life.[261] This can be seen, for example, in one of the main criticisms that Hunter levels against the Neo-Anabaptists in his investigation of the different approaches to culture adopted by American Evangelical Christianity, which is precisely that their response to the wider society is essentially negative: following their emphasis on an early church that developed independently of the State and in a hostile political environment , 'opposition was and remains centrally important to the Anabaptist identity and its vision of social and political engagement with the world'.[262]

We saw in the previous chapter that both Christian and non-Christian commentators on consumerism have historically taken an overwhelmingly negative approach – as typified in Bauman's writings – and Breathe members can have a tendency to follow suit. Indeed, nothing positive emerged from the research participants' understanding of the impact that consumerism has had on society. What emerged from some participants (though not from all) was the impression of an 'us versus them' worldview, in which they saw themselves as separated from those around them by virtue of their lifestyle decisions. **F**, for example, talked about seeing, 'quite a lot of my friends, where actually their identity is wrapped up so much in fashion trends and in

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[261] And monasticism has always recognised that the interior dimensions of one's life may bear little resemblance to the outer circumstances.

[262] J. Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World*, 151.

buying things for their children, that you just think, "my goodness, they don't need to have that, they're only tiny"', and she described 'that kind of mentality' as something that she was 'kicking against [as] part of simplicity'. This 'us verses them' worldview does not fit neatly into the distinction between Christian and non-Christian either, and **L** highlighted this in relation to a previous church to which he had belonged:

> We noticed that there were people who just used to do a lot of shopping and we caught the shopping bug from people. We would go to church … and we found ourselves wanting to go shopping more often and judging our clothes and we were told, 'wouldn't it be nice to have this', and 'this looks a bit old and faded and should be replaced'. And I realised we were getting it from the Christians!

This attitude stems from the very real desire not to allow the practices of consumerism to draw them away from a life lived Christianly and also from a recognition of the damage that is done to many living within a consumerist society. As **E**'s quote previously showed us, the research participants' attempts to live more simply stem partly from the view, 'that everyone's burning out, they're working too hard, they're too busy, their lives are too cluttered, consumerism has set in massively, shopping has become an obsession'. However, the danger is that 'they' becomes a term applied almost sanctimoniously to everyone else *en masse*. It is interesting in this regard to reflect on our previous discussion around asceticism. One concern about ascetic practices is that they can tend towards fuelling dualisms of different kinds and we see the possibility of this here too, not in the traditional dualism of flesh verses soul, but in the more modern context of us verses them.

Simultaneously, however, we have seen a number of examples of Breathe members articulating a desire to build relationships and community - both within and without the Church, and on a local and global level - and this stands in tension to the 'us verses them' attitude. There is thus a precarious path being trod between a pessimistic proclivity towards other people, which leads to a separatist approach, and a positive desire for community and engagement. In contrast to the Manichean chasm between church and world, evidenced in some forms of monasticism, Breathe members seek to walk a *via media* that recognises the many evils inherent within a consumerist system but yet does not separate itself off into a disengaged and defensive island. In doing so they hold together both the 'no' of God's judgement against unjust and oppressive

realms and the 'yes' of God's love for the world that he has created.[263] This *via media*, as Bretherton notes, 'implies neither withdrawal nor subcultural resistance but, as exemplified in the stories of Joseph, Daniel, and Esther, it entails combining active investment in Babylon's wellbeing with faithful particularity and obedience to God'.[264]

Markus' articulation of Augustine's concept of the *saeculum* is helpful for us in this regard.[265] He identifies that Greco-Roman culture had two spheres: the sacred and the profane. The sacred, 'was what belonged to the gods and to their cults', and the profane, 'was everything which lay outside the sanctuary, around the shrine: the sphere of ordinary everyday life'.[266] In the fourth century, as the Greco-Roman cult came into confrontation with Christianity, the profane became a negative term, associated with exclusion: a hostile sphere to the sacred. Augustine's notion of the secular was of the neutral sphere that lay in the middle: 'not a third City between the earthly and the heavenly, but their mixed, "inextricably intertwined" state in this temporal life'.[267]

We might profitably appropriate these spheres for our own understanding of how Breathe members approach the consumer society in which they live, gaining permission for this from Markus' statement that, 'the idea of the secular is present within the Christian tradition from the start but takes on a very different meaning according to the historical circumstances in which it is applied'.[268] The sacred, as that which is 'roughly coextensive with the sphere of Christian religious belief, practices, institutions, and cult', is where Breathe members locate themselves; living out a Christian life centered around one's relationship with God and focussed on care of local and global neighbour and of the wider creation. The profane, as that which is 'close to what has to be rejected in the surrounding culture, practises, institutions', is all that is evil within the structures of consumer society, what Bretherton would call, 'the imposition of instrumentalizing and commodifying logics upon social existence by

[263] N. Biggar, 'Seek the Welfare of the City: A Response to *Christianity and Contemporary Politics*', *Political Theology* 12.3, 454.
[264] L. Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics*, 191.
[265] R. Markus, *Christianity and the Secular*.
[266] Markus, *Secular*, 5.
[267] Markus, *Secular*, 39.
[268] Markus, *Secular*, 13.

state and market procedures'.[269] Breathe are right to see these two spheres as essentially antithetical, but in between is the secular, that which 'does not have such connotations of radical opposition to the sacred; it is more neutral, capable of being accepted or adapted'.[270] In this sphere lies the tension of Breathe's relationship with consumer society and, in particular, here is where can be located the many people – Christian and non – who are deliberately not immersing themselves indiscriminately into consumer culture, but are attempting to live their lives as best they might, carrying out their daily duties, managing their relationships to their best abilities and living in all the complexities of modern-day families.

The *saeculum* is that which enables Breathe to avoid the dual dangers of either a prolaptic acceptance of consumer culture or an alienating rejection and so provides balance for the rhythm of withdrawal and engagement. It also gives missiological content to their practices as they bear witness within this sphere to the possibility of redemptive hope in Christ.[271]

Part Two. A Eudaimonist Ethic

As this chapter has progressed, we have identified Breathe - and their articulation of what it means to live a simple life as a Christian in consumer society – as holding a number of extremes in tension and seeking to maintain a middle way between them all: between the extremes of a therapeutic narcissism and sacrificial self-abnegation; between a world-denying asceticism and an unqualified embrace of material goods, and between a whole-scale immersion in consumer culture and an unrelenting abandonment.

The question we are left with is, what theological framework will help us make sense of this and give voice to these themes with which Breathe are engaging? My initial attempts at thinking through a possible answer to this question drew me to Aristotle and Aquinas and the notion of the Golden Mean, or *via media*, as I perceived that such a concept might provide a helpful way of giving voice to Breathe's concern with the

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[269] L. Bretherton, '"How Shall We Sing the Lord's Song in a Strange Land?": A Response to the Symposium', *Political Theology* 12.3, 466. Markus, *Secular*, 5.
[270] Markus, *Secular*, 5–6.
[271] Bretherton, '"How Shall We Sing the Lord's Song in a Strange Land?": A Response to the Symposium', 469.

idea of 'enough', and their attempts to steer a middle ground through the three tensions that we have articulated above. I believe this notion is still valuable to our discussion and it will be explored later. What I discovered, though, was that the concept of the Golden Mean only finds its true significance within a broader set of questions that Aristotle and (more fully) Aquinas are seeking to answer; questions around the good life, and the life of virtue.

The rest of this chapter, therefore, will explore a justice-oriented eudaimonist ethic based on the tradition espoused particularly by Aristotle and Aquinas. We will do this by looking first at the foundations lain by Aristotle and then at the development given by Aquinas. As we do so, we will consider how this relates to the understanding of simplicity that has been unfolding through our research.

i. Aristotle

Aristotle opens *Nicomachean Ethics* (NE) with the statement, 'every sort of expert knowledge and every inquiry, and similarly every action and undertaking, seems to seek some good. Because of that, people are right to affirm that the good is "that which all things seek"' (1094a1-3).[272] Aristotle's aim is thus to find an answer to what that good is in life and how that good might be pursued. As is clear from this opening statement, Aristotle identifies that there are in life many different ends, related to many different activities, and these ends are what Aristotle calls, 'practicable' (1097a24). But, he posits that what he is looking for is that which is 'complete' and 'worth pursuing for itself' (1097a30-31). In other words, is there one thing, for the sake of which, all other things are done (1097a19-20)?

The answer is *eudaimonia*: 'happiness seems most of all to be like this; for this we do always choose because of itself and never because of something else' (1097b1-2).[273]

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[272] The translation being used is that provided by C. Rowe in, S. Broadie and C. Rowe, *Aristotle: Nicomachean Ethics. Translation, Introduction, and Commentary*.

[273] *Eudaimonia* is most commonly translated 'happiness'. This is not entirely satisfactory, however, as it does not quite match our contemporary understanding of happiness and has a fuller sense of well-being, flourishing, and completeness of life; what Broadie would equate with 'what one should value most' (S. Broadie, *Ethics With Aristotle*, 29). Hutchinson's attempt to render it as 'success' I also do not find satisfactory (D. Hutchinson, 'Ethics', in, J. Barnes (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle*, 200 fn 4. Because of this, unless using a direct quote, I will maintain the usage of the Greek *eudaimonia* rather than translating it.

Eudaimonia is thus the 'chief good' and the ultimate end of life. What that means is to be found in discovering what is 'peculiar to human beings' as opposed to that which is shared with all other animals (1098a1) and, for Aristotle, that lies in the human capacity for reason. Thus, 'the function of a human being is activity of soul in accordance with reason' (1098a8-9). And, as every activity is undertaken with a view to practising it to the best level possible, so too with life in general so that, 'the human good turns out to be activity of soul in accordance with excellence' (1098a16-17). It is important that that activity takes place over a lifetime: a one-off or irregular practice of reasonable excellence will not 'make a man blessed and happy' in the same way that 'a single swallow does not make spring' (1098a18-21). Although important and controversial qualifications are brought in later in Book X, at this foundational stage of NE, *eudaimonia* is thus defined in very active terms, as 'a sort of living well and doing well' (1098b22): it is a search to know what the good life is so that it can be lived better.[274]

The concept of excellence, then, or virtue ($\alpha\rho\epsilon\tau\eta$) is thus central to Aristotle's understanding of the good life, which is to be found not in the pursuit of amusement, wealth or power, but in the pursuit of being the best a human being can be in their capacity as a human being. It is the virtues that allow a human being to reach that purpose (1106a15-17). Without providing a definitive list (he seems to assume that his listeners' upbringing will already have educated them on that matter[275]), Aristotle categorises the virtues into two sorts: 'the one intellectual and the other of character, the intellectual sort mostly both comes into existence and increases as a result of teaching…, whereas excellence of character results from habituation' (1103a15-18). The importance of action is again stressed for it is through a person's actions that dispositions to behave in a certain way, whether good or bad, become settled in that person's life (1103a23 – 1103b26).

So how then should one act in order to live well? Aristotle shies away from being prescriptive, recognising as he does that he can only deal with such issues with a 'rough outline' rather than 'with precision' (1104a2-3). This is because, 'things in the

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[274] S. Broadie, *Ethics*, 3.
[275] S. Broadie, *Ethics*, 58.

sphere of action and things that bring advantage have nothing stable about them…, for it does not fall either under any expertise or under any set of rules – the agents themselves have to consider the circumstances relating to the occasion' (1104a1 – 1104a10). What he can offer, though, is his principle of the 'mean' of an action, since 'the sorts of things we are talking about are naturally such as to be destroyed by deficiency and excess' (1104a12-14).

According to Aristotle, a virtuous activity is that which lies in an intermediate position between what he calls 'two bad states, one involving excess, the other involving deficiency' (1107a3-4). Aristotle is not here referring to a mathematical mean.[276] Rather, and using the analogy of diet, Aristotle is at pains to stress that the mean is relative '*to us*' (1106b8), in other words it is 'determined with reference to the particular capacities and limitations of the person undertaking any given action'.[277] Thus there is no tight prescription as to what a virtuous action may look like in any particular situation, and indeed it may well veer more towards one extreme than the other. Aristotle is consequently aware that finding this mean of excellence is difficult to achieve, 'as for example finding the centre of a circle is not a task for anyone, but for the skilled person' (1109a26-27), and he advises that a person try to steer away from the extreme that they think is most attractive to them: 'one should sometimes incline towards excess, sometimes towards deficiency; for in this way we shall most easily hit upon what is intermediate, and good practice' (1109b25-27). The virtue of wisdom, Aristotle says, is that which finally enables a person to determine the intermediate (1107a2). When we look at Aquinas we will see how this doctrine works itself out more fully.

For Aristotle, *eudaimonia* is not to be equated with pleasure as such. Nonetheless the two are closely connected. Aristotle states the issue as being, 'whether we choose living because we want pleasure or pleasure because we want to be alive' (1175a18-19). As he debates this (and commentators differ as to how satisfactorily he does so[278]) he attempts to hold his ground in the face of two opposing opinions: firstly, that

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[276] See Broadie's commentary on 1106b7 (S. Broadie and C. Rowe, *Aristotle: Nicomachean Ethics*, 304).
[277] A. Tessitore, *Reading Aristotle's Ethics: Virtue, Rhetoric and Political Philosophy*, 27.
[278] C.f. the discussions in A. Tessitore, *Reading*, 62 – 72 and 110 – 111; S, Broadie, *Ethics*, and, D. Hutchinson, 'Ethics', in, J. Barnes (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle*, 210 – 212.

pleasure is an end in itself (see, for example, his refutation of Eudoxus' hedonism in 1172b9 – 1173a13) and second that all pleasure is wrong (1172b36 – 1173a14). Aristotle holds pleasure to be good, although he stipulates that such pleasure should derive from worthy activities, rather than from frivolous amusements (1175b24 – 76a29).

Overall, there is a tension at the heart of Aristotle's ethics over the place that pleasure occupies in his understanding, causing Tessitore to comment that, 'without going so far as to suggest that Aristotle advocates a kind of philosophic hedonism, it is sufficient to observe that the unanswered question about pleasure in Book X ... evidences the continuing presence of a perspective that is alien to the teaching on ethical virtue for which the *Ethics* is rightly famous'.[279] This tension is carried into Aristotle's final conclusion that, in the end and having spent so long on the life of virtue, it is actually a life of philosophic contemplation that is the 'complete happiness' (1178b9), with a life of ethical virtue carrying the status of 'second happiness' (1178a9).[280]

This initial exploration of the notion of *eudaimonia* is helpful in relation to our research and the attempt to live a more simple life, particularly as a response to consumer society. One of the key features that we saw both in the previous chapter and in the research analysis concerns the stimulation of desire and the search for happiness. A key issue for Breathe throughout has been how to hold together issues around personal well-being and notions of sacrificial living: issues which are prompted by the problems generated by globalisation and consumerism. We will turn now to Aquinas to ask how he might help with a more properly theological understanding. Although I am still in the early stages of my journey with him, I have chosen Aquinas as my conversation partner because I can identify some themes within his thought that are useful to my own considerations. My aim, therefore, is not

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[279] A. Tessitore, *Reading*, 111.
[280] There is disagreement over whether this tension can be resolved and, if so, how. Broadie's analysis seems most helpful here as she sees Aristotle building his conclusion from the beginning, but saving it till the end ('a slow climb brings us to the previously hidden view of a greater mountain beyond our mountain'). According to Broadie, Aristotle's final position is that he wishes to convince his audience (already of a philosophic inclination) that the best sort of life is, indeed, a life of reflection, but one that is rooted in practical and ethical qualities (S. Broadie and C. Rowe, *Aristotle*, 439).

to attempt any sort of overview or comprehensive understanding of the whole of Aquinas' theological schema, but, more humbly, simply to bring him into dialogue with my own concerns.

This next section looks at how Aquinas develops Aristotle's understanding of *eudaimonia*, giving it a more explicitly Christian framework. We will see that Aquinas' theological appropriation is helpful for us because of the positive approach that Breathe brings to the idea of simplicity. As we saw in our earlier research, a life lived more simply is identified as being personally beneficial: a life that brings joy and lightness (to use participants' words). This is a good antidote to the more 'doom and gloom' approach that can result from focussing on problems of global injustice and environmental destruction. The concept of *eudaimonia*, with its emphasis on notions of wellbeing and happiness, keeps us rooted in that affirmative attitude.

Concurrently, however, the very idea of *eudaimonia* contains within it the debate that has been coming to the fore through the course of this research: how to hold in tension one's own wellbeing with that of others. As we have seen, there is a drive within the simplicity movement towards a particular reading on self-realisation. This is not wholly bad and, as discussed in Part I of this chapter, is not to be discarded wholesale. But taken by itself it is not ultimately Christian because the Christian is to be focussed on the other as well as on the self.

In this next section, therefore, we will begin with a brief overview of Aquinas' understanding of *eudaimonia* and of the necessities of the virtuous life. Through a discussion on Aquinas' position on wealth and possessions, we will then draw on Aquinas' thinking around the virtues – particularly those of temperance and justice and their relationship to each other – to re-frame this discussion and help us find a way forward. As I do this, I will consider the notion of 'frugality' as a useful way of giving contemporary expression to where temperance and justice co-inhere.

ii. Aquinas
Aristotle lays crucial foundations in his discussions on the eudaimonist life. Writing some two centuries after Aristotle, in a very different cultural situation, and from a

radically different theological background, Aquinas began appropriating Aristotle's thought to develop his own answers to the question, 'of what does life consist?'.[281]

Following Aristotle's logic that starts with the notion of actions and the proposition that all actions are aimed at particular ends, Aquinas asserts that there is one end to which all things are directed: 'for there must be one last end of the human being as a human being, because there is only one human nature.'[282] This 'last end' is identified by Aquinas as, 'human good, or well being'.[283] This good is the most complete good: 'that which is so desired for its own sake, that it is never desired for the sake of anything else'.

In what does such *eudaimonia* (or *felicitas/beautitudo*) consist? On one level, Aquinas continues with Aristotle, basing his view on what he calls the actions that are 'proper to man' and locating *eudaimonia* with 'performance according to excellence'.[284] However, he proceeds to introduce his own significant interpretation of *eudaimonia*, drawing on his Christian heritage. For Aquinas, 'man's natural desire can in no other way be satisfied except in God alone'. At this deeper level, then, it is only God – 'the beatific vision' - that can give a person their 'ultimate perfection, which is the perfect happiness of man'.[285] In Aquinas' schema, God alone is the perfection of all that is and

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[281] N. Healy, *Thomas Aquinas: Theologian of the Christian Life*, 11. For an overview of the differences between them see, J. Owens, 'Aristotle and Aquinas', in, N. Kretzmann and E. Stump (Eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Aquinas*, 38 – 59. It scarce need be said that Aquinas' writings focus on an immense range of theological and philosophical issues, but the aim here is to concentrate on his discussions on *eudaimonia* and how they relate to the purposes of this thesis.

[282] The citations in this and the following paragraph are taken from, Aquinas, *Commentary on the Ethics*, Book 1, *lectiones 9 – 10*, sections 103 – 111, from, C. Martin (Ed.), *The Philosophy of Thomas Aquinas: Introductory Readings*, 170 – 173.

[283] Aquinas uses *felicitas* when translating Aristotle's *eudaimonia*, and *beatitudo* when undertaking his own treatment of happiness. He seems to treat the two synonymously (A. Kenny, 'Aquinas on Aristotelian Happiness', in, S. McDonald and E. Stump (Eds.), *Aquinas' Moral Theory: Essays in Honour of Norman Kretzmann*, 20).

Eudaimonia is here translated 'well-being' whilst other translators use 'happiness'. As previously, I prefer to use the original unless citing another's translation.

[284] See, for example, his discussion in 'Article 1: Whether it belongs to man to act for an end' (*ST*, I-II.1.8). See also, Aquinas, 'On the Virtues in General', in, R. Goodwin (trans.), *Selected Writings of St Thomas Aquinas: The Principles of Nature; On Being and Essence; On the Virtues in General; On Free Choice*, 82, and, Aquinas, *Commentary on the Ethics*, section 128, from, C. Martin (Ed.), *The Philosophy of Thomas Aquinas*, 170 – 173. Translations of Aquinas use exclusive language and I make no attempt to change them. All citations from the *Summa Theologiae* are taken from the online text found at http://www.newadvent.org/summa.

[285] Aquinas, 'On the Virtues in General', in, R. Goodwin (trans.), *Selected Writings*, 101.

all things can only find their being in an analogous relationship to God.[286] Thus humanity's aim is 'movement into God'.[287]

Aquinas transforms Aristotle's concept of *eudaimonia* (which Aristotle viewed as being achievable in this life and through one's own rational contemplation) by positing the notion of there being two kinds of happiness. Clearly, 'perfect happiness can consist in nothing else than the vision of the Divine Essence' (ST I-II. 3.8). But, he does also stipulate that some sort of happiness can be reached in this life too (I-II. 5.5) and so he introduces the theological distinction between 'imperfect' and 'perfect' happiness.

This imperfect happiness consists in the operation of the virtues (I-II, 5.5) and is akin to Aristotle's 'second happiness', but Aquinas draws on Christian tradition and the Scriptures to explicate the presence not only of the two sorts of virtues of which Aristotle spoke (the intellectual and the moral/cardinal) but of a third category, that of the theological. Leaving aside here the intellectual virtues, the moral virtues are those that are needed for a good or happy life in the present: they are predominantly the virtues of temperance, courage, justice and prudence, and they can be acquired through the practice of good habits. In this sense, 'human virtue directed to the good which is defined according to the rule of human reason can be caused by human acts' (I-II. 63.2). These virtues are thus 'acquired', in that they can be gained through human action.

However, these virtues have their limitations because, 'the power of those naturally instilled principles does not extend beyond the capacity of nature'. Because of this, a person, 'needs in addition to be perfected by other principles in relation to his supernatural end' (I-II. 63.3). These other principles are twofold. They are, primarily, the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity: virtues that are 'infused', in that they come from God alone and not through any human effort, and are fully directed to the supernatural end (I-II. 62.1). Secondarily, both the intellectual and the moral virtues

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[286] S. DeCrane, *Aquinas, Feminism, and the Common Good*, 44; J. Wippell, 'Metaphysics', in, *The Ethics of Aquinas*, 89 – 93.
[287] F. Kerr, *After Aquinas: Versions of Thomism*, 114.

can also be infused when their end is directed towards God as opposed to that which is purely natural (I-II. 63.3-4).

This understanding of *eudaimonia* and of the virtues lays the foundation for the rest of our discussion around Aquinas. Aquinas gives us a properly Christian framework within which we can explore the question that underlies this thesis: ie, how does one live well as a Christian in contemporary consumer society? The notion of well-being, or happiness, is an apposite one today and one that has featured strongly throughout our research, but Aquinas demonstrates that it only functions when subsumed into a larger whole: that of life with God. In this way, Aquinas shows that happiness in the present is possible, but it is only possible through a life of grace-filled virtue, and it is through such a life that a person is enabled to move towards life in the divine. The virtues are thus key to Aquinas' understanding of *eudaimonia* and, as we will go on now to explore, they can play a vital role in helping our research participants articulate how to live faithfully in the midst of the tensions that have been identified.

An important aspect of our discussion is considering what place money and possessions hold in Aquinas's treatment of happiness. His overall view seems to be summarised in his agreement on this point with Aristotle that, 'riches we do not desire except in so far as they are useful for a human life'.[288] Two points arise from this: the one is that gaining riches does not constitute the overall thing that is to be desired: a happiness derived from such an attainment would, for Aquinas, be, 'a mistaken form of happiness'.[289] Concurrently, though, there is also no indication in Aquinas' writings of an outright rejection of riches. Whilst very clearly recognising that, 'it is impossible for happiness, which is the last end of man, to consist in wealth' (I-II, 2.1), material goods are still seen positively as being useful for human life.

It is in this simple statement about riches that we touch one of the neuralgic points of our research: what place do material goods occupy in the eudaimonist life? In other words, for our Breathe participants, is *eudaimonia* primarily a search for personal happiness or does it encompass a broader remit?

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[288] Aquinas, *Commentary on the Ethics*, section 128, from, C. Martin (Ed.), *The Philosophy of Thomas Aquinas*, section 110, 171.
[289] J. Porter, *Nature As Reason: A Thomistic Theory of the Natural Law*, 167.

Porter's discussion of this issue within Aquinas is very helpful. For Porter, there is a distinction to be made between 'well-being' and 'happiness'. Well-being, for Porter, is, 'the general normative ideal of human flourishing, … analogous to the normative ideal of flourishing proper to any other kind of creature, and as such, it will include all the components of a humanly desirable life, including life itself, health, security, and participation in a network of family and social relations'.[290] Happiness, on the other hand, is, 'the distinctively moral ideal specifying and qualifying' this well being: it is that which specifies, 'the best or most appropriate way in which men and women can attain and enjoy the activities constitutive of well-being'.[291] Porter wishes to assert that the two are not coterminous: one cannot simply equate well-being with happiness. Simultaneously, however, it is insufficient to profess that, 'true happiness (authentic human existence) is not a matter of animal well-being' at all: the two should not be divorced too far.[292] As we have noted, when we look at Aquinas we see that his emphasis on the beatific vision does not negate the possibility of, 'a form of happiness which is connatural to the human being considered as a specific kind of creature'.[293] Nonetheless, he locates that happiness in a life rooted in the virtues, both acquired and infused, because it is just such a life that orients a person towards God.[294] As Kerr beautifully expresses it, 'Thomas offers a moral theology, a Christian ethics, which is centred on one's becoming the kind of person who would be fulfilled only in the promised bliss of face-to-face vision of God'.[295]

For Porter, the notion of virtue is richer and more comprehensive than that of well-being, placing, as it does, life's focus elsewhere. Well-being and virtue do remain tethered together, with well-being standing, 'to the life of virtue … as condition and ground'. Crucially, though, virtue, 'can take forms which seem, at least prima facie, to renounce aspects of the more basic ideal – the obvious example being the monastic ideal of poverty, celibacy, and obedience, explicitly defended by Aquinas and his contemporaries as a life of praiseworthy renunciation of fundamental human

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[290] Porter, *Nature*, 142 – 143.
[291] Porter, *Nature*, 142 – 143.
[292] Porter, *Nature*, 154 – 155.
[293] Porter, *Nature*, 157.
[294] Porter, *Nature*, 159 – 162, 169.
[295] Kerr, *After Aquinas*, 118.

goods'.[296] Thus the ideal of virtue allows for a life that is not solely preoccupied with pursuing well-being.

The relevance of this for Breathe and for our development of a theological framework for simple living is clear. What this gives articulation to is not a wholesale renunciation of material goods, but a recognition that a life rooted in the virtues might indeed actually re-frame our understanding of what constitutes well-being. As we consider Breathe's concerns with matters of human inequality and suffering, and with ecological problems, as well as their struggles with the extent to which the motivation for a life lived simply is self-fulfilment, this re-constituting is vital. Thus, as Porter recognises, 'the exigencies of reflection on the virtues themselves open up the possibility that the happiness proper to virtue may be consistent with ways of living which involve the deliberate renunciation of some aspects of well-being'.[297]

There are two virtues that seem of particular significance to our discussions here – that of temperance and justice – and a brief consideration of them is apposite. If a virtue is simply, 'a stable disposition to act in ways that are good'[298], then temperance is a stable disposition to act in ways that are good in relation to our appetite for material goods. For Aquinas, as we have seen, the good equates with the norm as prescribed by reason (II-II, 141.1) which finds its ultimate fulfilment in God, so that temperance (and the other moral virtues) is concerned with how a person brings their appetites under the control of reason (as opposed to 'the inclination of the animal nature', II-II, 141.1) and Divine Law (II-II, 141.2).[299] Temperance is, for Aquinas, 'a certain disposition of the soul that imposes the limit on whatever passions or operations, lest they be carried beyond their due' (I-II.61.3). It is important to highlight that Aquinas here is not just adding a Christian gloss to an Aristotelian structure: although primarily related to the things that are 'natural to man', temperance has 'excellence' as its focus: an excellence that is related to the Divine Law (II-II, 141.2).[300]

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[296] Porter, *Nature*, 162.
[297] Porter, *Nature*, 174.
[298] S. Pope, 'Overview of the Ethics of Thomas Aquinas', in, Pope, *Ethics*, 34.
[299] N. Healy, *Thomas Aquinas: Theologian of the Christian Life*, 120.
[300] Healy, *Thomas Aquinas*, 119.

Temperance has as it aim both the more exclusively physical goal of being, 'to ensure that one's desires for, and one's use and enjoyment of, food, drink, and sexual relations are consistent with the preservation of the individual and the species', and also the wider goal of ensuring, 'that one's engagement with these sensible goods exhibit moral and spiritual beauty or honor'.[301] Aristotle's doctrine of the mean is drawn on and temperance is thus seen as a *via media* between a self-indulgent love of sensory experience and an improper indifference towards them.[302] As we saw in relation to Aristotle's understanding of the mean, the practical outworking of temperance changes as befits an individual's situation and the circumstances that they stand within.

What is evident is that temperance, for Aquinas, cannot be equated with a Puritan account.[303] Although arising partly from a fear of the consequences of, 'man's appetite [being] corrupted chiefly by those things which seduce him into forsaking the rule of reason and Divine law' (II-II, 141.2), temperance also stems from a desire to use rightly those things that are pleasurable. Pleasure is wrong when it threatens the rule of reason, but pleasure is not wrong intrinsically. What is important is having one's appetites rightly ordered and acting accordingly. Cates can thus summarise Thomist temperance as being, 'best construed as a habit of being consistently moved and pleased in a beautiful and honorable manner by attractive objects of sense experience'.[304]

Cates arguably overstates the extent to which a Thomist understanding of temperance focuses on the positive. Austin has well demonstrated that the dominant note in Aquinas' discussion on temperance is restraint because Aquinas presupposes that the primary extreme that humans tend towards in relation to 'the things that especially attract man' (II-II,141.2) is one of excess rather than deficit.[305]

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[301] D. Cates, 'The Virtue of Temperance (IIa IIae, qq. 141 – 170)', in, Pope, *Ethics*, 321, drawing on II-II, 141.5 and 2.
[302] J. Porter, 'The Virtue of Justice (IIa IIae, qq. 58 – 122)', in, Pope, *Ethics*, 274.
[303] Cates, 'Temperance', in, Pope, *Ethics*, 323.
[304] Cates, 'Temperance', in, Pope, *Ethics*, 323.
[305] N. Austin, *Thomas Aquinas on the Four Causes of Temperance*, 69 – 76.

Nonetheless, a Thomist account of temperance moves us away from the dangers of the world-denying asceticism that we discussed in the first part of this chapter, into an appreciation of what it means to use pleasurable things rightly. As we have seen, such an understanding for Aquinas is always determined teleologically, through a consideration of the end to which pleasurable things are to be used. That end is twofold. The immediate, proximate end is whatever, 'the need of this life requires (II-II, 141.6)' (what Aquinas understands by this will be explored below), but that proximate end is subsumed into the ultimate end of all virtuous living, namely *beatitudo*. Temperance is thus undertaken not just for the sake of the well-being of one's body, but in order to direct one towards God. As Austin argues, therefore, the desire for pleasurable things, whilst not wrong in itself and indeed capable of directing a person to God, still has a limit and should continue only so far as until that need is met.[306] The notions of limit and restraint, therefore, are undoubtedly strong in Aquinas' exposition of temperance, but they are to be understood teleologically: 'for Aquinas, temperance is a form of purposeful limitation: limiting the pursuit of one good for the sake of a greater good'.[307]

Although Aquinas focuses his attention on the appetite for food, drink and sex, I believe we may remain faithful to his thought in broadening the remit to include the wider spectrum of material goods that are on offer today and that Breathe members have articulated as having a desire for: things such as type of house, car, clothes and technological equipment, as well as financial income. The consistent toll in the research of the word, 'enough', chimes well with Aquinas' understanding of temperance as the *via media* between two extremes, and the recognition that there can be no one legalistic way to locate where that *via media* lies: it takes prudence to discern where that point is (II-II, 47.7), and that point will vary according to individual circumstance and cultural context. Our research participants would resonate with Aquinas' view that, 'temperance takes the need of this life, as the rule of the pleasurable objects of which it makes use, and uses them only for as much as the need of this life requires' (II-II, 141.6), both in the sense of only using something as one has need, and also in the sense that such a use can be pleasurable.

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[306] Austin, *Temperance*, 226.
[307] Austin, *Temperance*, 220.

This account of temperance is helpful, providing a constructive framework for the desire within simple living to resist the societal pressure that gives free reign to one's appetites and encourages a person to over-consume. On its own, however, it is questionable as to whether it is able to resist the pressure to focus on oneself and one's own sense of well-being and self-fulfilment, whether physical or existential: a temptation that, as we have seen, is alive and well within the simplicity movement. In order for this to happen, Aquinas' understanding of how the virtues relate together must be remembered. There is an ecology within the virtues which means that they work together and cannot be read in isolation. Thus temperance is not temperance unless it is held together with fortitude, prudence, charity and so on. Space does not allow an investigation of this in its entirety, but the purposes of this thesis lead us to focus on one of these other virtues and to see how temperance needs to be fortified with that of justice.

It is imperative here not to posit a dualistic framework, viewing temperance and justice as in some sense opposed to each other. Porter comes close to this perspective when she states that, where temperance is concerned with the good of the individual, justice is concerned with actions that are directed towards the good of the community and of others.[308] Austin's careful reading of Aquinas' account of temperance cautions against holding this position too rigidly.[309] He considers what Aquinas means by, 'the needs of this life', and sees that Aquinas develops (in ST II-II, 141) a hierarchy of three levels of need. Firstly, there is the physical need of what a body needs to live. Secondly, there is what is needed in order 'to live fittingly' in relation to money and a person's position in society ('offices'). Thirdly, there is what is needed to live fittingly as regards an honourable life of virtue.

In this hierarchy, Aquinas provides a generous account of 'needs', moving away from too austere a position that would hold that, 'whoever was to use any pleasure above the need of nature, which is truly content with very little, would sin against temperance', and instead allowing for the moderate use of things which are not

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[308] J. Porter, *The Recovery of Virtue: The Relevance of Aquinas for Christian Ethics*, 124; Porter, 'Justice', in, Pope, *Ethics*, 274.
[309] Austin, *Temperance*, 207 – 234.

absolutely necessary for the maintenance of life, but which also do no bodily harm. The key point is that these things are to be used, 'according to the demands of place and time, and in keeping with those among whom one dwells'. (II-II, 141.6). Through this statement, Austin highlights the relational and social nature of the main issues with which Thomist temperance is concerned (food, drink and sex) and is thus able to conclude: 'the need of human life is intrinsically relational, and so, therefore, is the end of temperance'.[310]

This may seem to be at odds with Aquinas' own words when he finishes his section on temperance by asking whether it is the best of the virtues and concludes,

> As the Philosopher declares (Ethic. i, 2) "the good of the many is more of the godlike than the good of the individual," wherefore the more a virtue regards the good of the many, the better it is. Now justice and fortitude regard the good of the many more than temperance does, since justice regards the relations between one man and another, while fortitude regards dangers of battle which are endured for the common weal: whereas temperance moderates only the desires and pleasures which affect man himself. (II-II, 141.6)

However, the key is in understanding *why* the desires and pleasures of man are to be moderated. Aquinas is clear that 'the end and rule of temperance itself is happiness' (II-II, 141.6), which returns us to our discussion on how we are to understand happiness and leads us to the virtue of justice.

Aquinas' discussion on justice is extensive and complex: our aim here is only to see how it relates to temperance. Porter has written extensively on Thomist justice and it is her work that gives us our starting point.[311] Justice is concerned with actions that are directed towards the good of the community and of others. As such, it is rooted not in the appetites but in the will, as the immediate source of those actions.[312] Understood in this way, 'justice involves a disposition of rationally informed

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[310] Austin, *Temperance*, 234.
[311] Although I use Porter's work here, I have done so with an eye trained on Aquinas' own thoughts, particularly as expressed in the section on justice in *ST* II-II, 58. I chose Porter rather than MacIntyre or Hauerwas because, overall, I found her discussion on well-being and happiness particularly pertinent to my own thinking.
[312] J. Porter, *The Recovery of Virtue*, 124; Porter, 'Justice', in, Pope, *Ethics*, 274.

commitments to maintaining certain kinds of relationships with others, rather than a disposition to feel and respond in a particular way'.[313]

Central to Aquinas' notion of justice is the claim that, 'just as love of God includes love of our neighbour, as stated above (II-II, 25.1), so too the service of God includes rendering to each one his due' (II-II, 58.1). Such an understanding means that justice requires a person to respect the prerogatives of others, regardless of one's own proclivities: hence why justice is an act of will rather than emotion. Justice is thus a necessary virtue because people's natural orientation is towards their own good.[314]

The key question for our purposes is, what is the relationship between temperance and justice, between the individual good and the good of others and of the common? Aquinas deems there to be no conflict, and locates his reason in his theological anthropology, rooted as it is in the image of God (I-II, Prologue). Of course, the hierarchical nature of Aquinas' anthropology raises many problems, not least for those who seek to recover an egalitarian understanding of the relationship between women and men, and for those who are attempting to move away from a domineering view of humanity's relationship with the wider creation.[315] Nonetheless, his insistence on the sociality of human beings – as male and female, made in the image of God – can be helpfully appropriated. Aquinas believed that, 'man is naturally a social being, and so in the state of innocence he would have led a social life' (I-II, 96.4).[316] It is thus within this social framework that a person grows toward perfection. DeCrane expresses this helpfully:

> The goodness of the human person is not one that can be pursued by the person in isolation. By the very constitution of the person, her good is one that is authentically pursued in the company of others. ... Aquinas valued the material and social dimension of the person as important to her growth in perfection and goodness and did not expect a person to transcend or reject her materiality to choose a gnostic type of good.[317]

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[313] Porter, *Nature*, 205.
[314] Porter, *Nature*, 217, 207.
[315] See, for example, S. DeCrane, *Feminism*, and, C. Deane-Drummond, *Eco-Theology*.
[316] P. Sigmund, 'Law and Politics', in, Kretzmann and Stump (Eds.), *Cambridge Companion*, 218.
[317] S. DeCrane, *Feminism*, 57.

Aquinas has no hesitation in asserting that, 'the common good transcends the individual good of one person' (II-II. 58.12). And yet this does not mean for him that the good of an individual is thereby ignored. Rather, 'he that seeks the good of the many, seeks in consequence his own good, … because the individual good is impossible without the common good of the family, state, or kingdom' (II-II. 58.10). In this way, as Porter says, 'the well-being of individual and community are interrelated in such a way that what promotes one promotes the other, and what harms one harms the other as well'.[318]

In this statement, Porter reflects her embedding in Catholic Social Teaching and its understanding of the common good, which also works hard to interrelate concern for self with concern for others, and argues that the two are mutually coexistent. The common good is that which is, 'the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfilment more fully and more easily', and it is within the context of having the common good as the primary goal that authentic human development can take place.[319] This notion of the primary goal thus emphasises an aspect of this discussion that is important in regards to our desire to find a framework for how a simple lifestyle can hold together self and others. It moves us beyond a position that says that the needs of the self and the needs of others should be maintained in a carefully balanced equilibrium, to one that sees the needs of self as *only* able to be fulfilled through the process of meeting the needs of others. As is expressed, '*the human person cannot find fulfilment in himself … apart from the fact that he exists "with" others and "for" others*'.[320]

When we reflect back on our research findings it will become apparent how apposite this understanding is. Simple living, as expressed by the Breathe members, is concerned with how one could live rightly in our contemporary context (as Aquinas would say, 'according to the demands of place and time'): how might one live well in relation to God; in relation to others both locally and globally; in relation to the wider creation, and in relation to oneself? Aquinas' thought, and its contemporary articulation in CST, provides a framework that brings these different elements

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[318] Porter, *Recover*, 127.
[319] Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 83.
[320] Pontifical Council, *Compendium*, 83 (italics in the original).

together and, instead of trying to hold them apart as rivals, draws them together as vital constituents of a life moving towards perfection in God. For Aquinas, therefore, love of self – rightly understood – is secondary only to love for God (II-II, 26.4). This is helpful material to bring alongside our research findings: to enable the participants to articulate a robust understanding of *eudaimonia* that sees that self-fulfilment can only be found when one's life is other-focussed, in practicing justice: 'for the agent to attain her true good she must stand in right relation to other persons and her community'.[321]

Temperance is thus integrally bound up with justice (and likewise with charity); is caught up into its telos so that justice functions as a motivator to act, 'for the good of the other'.[322] In order to understand this more fully, a tight distinction must be made between self-restraint and a Thomist understanding of temperance. Akin to our earlier discussion on asceticism, self-restraint is broad-ranging and can cover a number of different aims, some of which Aquinas highlights, such as improving one's health. Not every aim of self-restraint is oriented towards the kinds of goals that our research participants have identified and such self-restraint is admirable but it is not temperance. As Aquinas says,

> those who lack other virtues, through being subject to the opposite vices, have not the temperance which is a virtue, though they do acts of temperance from a certain natural disposition, in so far as certain imperfect virtues are either natural to man, as stated above (I-II, 63, 1), or acquired by habituation, which virtues, through lack of prudence, are not perfected by reason, as stated above' (II-II, 141.1).

For an act truly to be temperate it must be drawn by the particular ends of justice: 'temperance, without justice, would not be a virtue' (I-II, 68.5).

In terms of our research findings, we saw in Chapter 2 that frugality is a word that encapsulates much of what Breathe members understand by simple living: thinking carefully about and reducing the amount of what is both earned and used, both for one's own sake and for the sake of one's relationship with God and his human and non-human creation. The Thomist understanding of temperance that we have been

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[321] Porter, *Nature*, 205, 209-210.
[322] Austin, *Temperance*, 321.

developing here is what gives theological content to this notion of frugality and helps draw out the overriding motivation for Breathe members' desire to pursue a life of simplicity, with justice at its heart. As interviewee **B** said, 'I think just living simply for its own sake, it can be a good thing, but if it doesn't have that sense of community and that sense of generosity about it then it can be equally selfish really', and this was agreed with more positively by **C**: 'I suppose for me that's what is at the heart of simplicity; it's not for simplicity's sake, it's simplicity so that there is an equal share for all'. The notion of frugality is thus an attempt to give modern expression to this specific concept that is of such importance to our research participants.

This articulation of temperance thus gives to the practice of simplicity its particularly Christian underpinning. There are many different traditions of simplicity, arising from all faiths and none, but our research has helped us frame a truly Christian simplicity as arising from a desire to promote the welfare of the other, rather than from predominantly self-centred aims, and that such a life is embraced as an essential part of moving towards God.

As such it forms a partial expression of Christian practices of justice. We have already noted in chapter 2 the criticism coming from Humphery around a lack of political and macro-level engagement that can accompany a focus on issues of lifestyle and simple living, and so here too we recognise that frugality is not a sufficient expression of justice: there are other practices (for example community engagement and campaigning work) that cannot be subsumed under this category. Nonetheless, temperance is an important aspect of justice that must not be neglected. In this we would agree with Austin that, 'those concerned for the common good should therefore be committed to temperance as an important social virtue'.[323] As we have seen throughout the research, the practice of simplicity is concerned with right relationships, on all levels. It recognises that I have a relationship not only with my next-door-neighbour, but also with the person who picks my tea leaves and the trees that breathe out oxygen and provide my paper, and, because of this, it recognises that I have a responsibility to be acting in ways that enhance those relationships rather than engaging in practices that are detrimental.

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[323] Austin, *Temperance*, 321.

To use Aquinas' terms, temperance is predominantly an act of commutative justice, 'which is concerned about the mutual dealings between two persons' (II-II, 61.1). But it does also bear some relation to distributive justice in so far as Breath's practice of frugality arises out of the concern that, as expressed by **L**, 'we've got too much stuff and if we had less stuff other people would have more stuff'. It thus reflects Aquinas' view that, 'distributive justice is also in the subjects to whom those goods are distributed in so far as they are contented by a just distribution' (II-II, 61.1).

It is important to highlight at this point that a life lived based on these understandings - in the face of a culture that so often pushes in the opposite direction - can be hard, and the bass notes of sacrifice that appeared in our earlier research must not be forgotten. It is here that the flaws of Aristotle's *Nichomachean Ethics* become readily apparent, as it is incapable of equipping the Christian for a life directed towards God, and all that that entails. If Aquinas' finely-held balance between the individual, others, and the community is an ideal, then it needs to be acknowledged that the person who pursues this ideal in a fallen world will inevitably make choices that lead to a life that is detrimental to a thin understanding of well-being. The importance of justice as a matter of the will is crucial here (sometimes decisions have to be made through gritted-teeth), as is the foundational nature of grace. To live in such a way requires the virtues to be infused in one's life. In particular, although I have chosen to focus on temperance and justice, neither are complete without *caritas*. One's desire for justice is inspired by God's love and thus arises out of love – for God and God's creation – and it is such love that keeps one on the hard path, enabled to live sacrificially.

One aspect of Aquinas' explication of justice that reaches to the heart of the motivation for living more simply is his understanding of theft. Theft, for Aquinas, has two dimensions to it. At its most obvious, theft is to be condemned when one person takes the personal property of another individual (or of the state). Aquinas thus supports the notion of private property, rooting it as he does in natural law: God has, 'according to His providence, directed certain things to the sustenance of man's body. For this reason man has a natural dominion over things, as regards the power to make use of them' (II-II, 66.1). The second dimension though is that Aquinas does not see

ownership of property as an absolute right or good, for the self-same reason that all things are received from God (II-II, 66.1). Because of this, there will be times when it is theft to keep from someone what is their due. In particular, where there is extreme need, Aquinas does not see it as theft to take another's goods in order to ameliorate that need: 'it is not theft, properly speaking, to take secretly and use another's property in a case of extreme need: because that which he takes for the support of his life becomes his own property by reason of that need' (II-II, 66.7).

There is much in Aquinas' words on these matters that would make for provocative discussion at a governmental level, particularly his views that, if need be, goods can be taken by force in order to meet the needs of the common good if they are not willingly given up (II-II, 66.8). Our interest, though, is on the implication it has for individuals. The desire to live simply arises partly from an acutely held awareness of the ways in which high levels of consumption and resource-use perpetuate injustice. It is keenly felt that such consumption and resource use is not only unfair, but actually comes *at the expense* of others who are thereby impoverished as a result. To live in such a way is not only callous but, in Aquinas' terms, actually constitutes theft. There would be approval of Aquinas' repetition of Ambrose' statement that, 'he who spends too much is a robber' (II-II, 66.2). Aquinas' views on theft - as part of his broader understanding of the virtue of justice - thus provide a strong imperative for the importance of reducing one's consumption and resource use.

Let us return to the question that initially prompted this discussion: what place do material goods hold in the eudaimonist life? What we have seen is that Aquinas follows Aristotle in giving a positive place to material goods. Coming from a position of natural law, they have been given to human beings by God, for our use. Indeed, a certain level of material goods are needed in order to be able to pursue a virtuous life, if only because the virtues are never practised in theory; they are enacted precisely through how we use such goods in the normal course of life. Porter thus describes the necessities of life as, the 'fields of operation for the virtues'.[324] In this sense, Porter is able to maintain that, for Aquinas, 'the virtuous life will normally be an enjoyable life,

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[324] Porter, *Nature*, 167. Bradley, likewise, describes external goods as, 'the necessary conditions of virtuous activity' (Bradley, *Human Good*, 400).

satisfying through its participation in the kinds of things that most people, in most times and places, do regard as desirable and fulfilling – marriage, children, a secure place in society, and the like'.[325]

Concurrently, however, is the insistence that *eudaimonia* does not consist in the acquisition of such goods themselves but, as stated above, in how they are used in order to move a person toward their end. The concept of right use is crucial here, as we saw it to be earlier in this chapter: how might one use one's own goods in a way that is prudent, courageous, temperate and just; that befits the person moving towards God? The overriding answer is that material goods are to be used to help others. Standing on the shoulders of what we have already seen to be a strong Christian tradition in this regard, Aquinas is clear and uncompromising:

> whatever certain people have in superabundance is due, by natural law, to the purpose of succoring the poor. For this reason Ambrose [Loc. cit., 2, Objection 3] says, and his words are embodied in the Decretals (Dist. xlvii, can. Sicut ii): "It is the hungry man's bread that you withhold, the naked man's cloak that you store away, the money that you bury in the earth is the price of the poor man's ransom and freedom. (II-II, 66.7)

As we begin to move towards some conclusions, it will be apparent how much there is in Aquinas' thought that is apposite to our own deliberations. The emphasis on *eudaimonia* provides a propitious way forward through the different debates and tensions that have emerged through the course of the research, highlighting as it does the positive approach to life that evidently emerges from a desire to live more simply.

As a part of this, the central role that the virtues play in such a life provides a helpful tool with which to navigate the many quandaries that accompany trying to walk well through contemporary life. For individuals marred by sin, living within sinful structures, in a world that is itself a 'world of wounds'[326], the question of how to live well does not offer up easy answers. The path of simple living is often marked with conflict and the need to make hard choices. In such circumstances, Deane-

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[325] Porter, *Nature*, 172.

[326] A. Leopold, *Sand County Almanac*, 197, cited in, S. Bouma-Prediger, *for the beauty of the earth: a christian vision for creation care*, 16. The full citation is, "one of the penalties of an ecological education is that one lives alone in a world of wounds".

Drummond is surely right to say that the virtuous person will act, "in pain and regret", and in the knowledge that, whatever action they decide to take, they will be, "marred in some way".[327]

It is in this context that the doctrine of the mean finds its force. Despite its practical and conceptual difficulties[328], it still functions as a metaphor to which people can relate, and this gives it ethical authority. The notion of 'enough', that features so prominently in our research findings, can be seen as the participants' contemporary expression of the *via media*, giving voice to the middle line that they are trying to hold in their understanding of simple living. The imprecision of where that *via media* lies and the relation that it has to each person's individual circumstances is not to be viewed as a problem. Rather it gives freedom for 'enough' to be something that is not determined with exactitude but is always held ahead as a state that is desired to be reached: an ideal with which to wrestle and debate.

Aquinas' eudaimonist ethic, as we have seen, arises from his understanding of the true end of humanity, found ultimately in the beatific vision, yet also allowing for a present, 'imperfect' happiness. For our Breathe participants, that ultimate end in God has implications for how our present life is to be lived, rooted in a reading of Scripture that sees God's work in Christ as operating on more than an individual level alone; reaching into the whole creation and having radical implications for the value of that creation and for our place within it as human beings. The understanding of simplicity coming from the research is a holistic one, rooted firmly in a desire to move closer to God and that sees taking our responsibility to our human and non-human neighbour seriously as a key way by which to do that.

Within our current global and societal context, that responsibility cannot be taken seriously without a consideration of our own levels of consumption and personal expenditure. Aquinas' discussion on the virtues of temperance and justice brings a deeper understanding as to what is taking place in the decision to live more simply. On the one level there is a recognition that over-consumption is bad for us as human

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[327] C. Deane-Drummond, *The Ethics of Nature*, 7.

[328] For a discussion of the conceptual problems and the problems that Aristotle seemed to have had with the concept of the mean, see S Broadie, *Ethics*, 95 – 103.

beings, causing us physical and psychological harm. To be a more temperate person, therefore, is to demonstrate a wise consideration for one's well-being (the physical and existential 'needs of this life').

But temperance does not end there as it gets caught up into the virtue of justice, which then widens out the remit for denying oneself beyond only for the sake of some personal need to incorporate the notion of making positive choices that build relationships and protect the wider creation. I have suggested that frugality is a helpful contemporary term for this practice. Returning to our discussion in the first part of this chapter, it may also be useful to think of the practices of, and motivation for, living more simply as a type of generous, or kindly, asceticism. As we do so we are reminded of the rhythm of withdrawal and engagement as, through temperance, our acts of justice involve withdrawing from unhelpful practices of over-consumption, but we then engage in positive practices that foster restorative relationships. Aquinas thus helps us gain a fuller appreciation of how the practices involved in simplicity can change our understanding of what constitutes well-being, and can help individuals embrace the challenges of a life lived sacrificially.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have moved towards giving a theological perspective to the issues raised in the previous chapters. As the research has progressed we have identified a number of clear issues that could potentially lead to contradictions in our understanding of simplicity. We looked at those issues by way of what I describe as a series of 'tensional relationships'.

In the first part of the chapter, therefore, we looked at the dangers that our research participants are seeking to avoid whilst trying to follow a path of living more simply: the dangers of dissolving into a therapeutic, individualised understanding of Christianity; the danger of embracing a world-denying attitude, and the danger of retreating into an oppositional enclave. We saw through this discussion that a key aspect of discovering what simple living entails is about trying to negotiate a middle way between these dangers and their opposite counterparts.

We were left with the question of how to make sense of this theologically and so the rest of the chapter focussed on considering what resources a eudaimonist ethic might have to offer in this regard. The concept of *eudaimonia* is a helpful one because of the consumer's search for happiness and self-fulfilment. *Eudaimonia* takes that search and interrogates it from a richer perspective, asking what actually constitutes *eudaimonia* and placing it within a thicker framework. As we do so we begin to see a way forward through the tensions involved in simplicity, in particular the tension between self and others.

Here it is worth emphasising again that Aquinas is able to take us so much further than Aristotle in this regard. For Aristotle, the good life is that of a life fulfilled in the present through philosophical contemplation and the practice of the virtues. For the Christian, however, this is more problematic because the good life is not necessarily the wholesome, fulfilled life: it might be a life spent for others that is painful and difficult. Aquinas' discussion on the virtues, and on his understanding of the place of riches in the Christian life, gives us resources to cope with this. Focussing on a life moving towards God helps us see that notions of well-being, virtues and the cross can be held together, albeit with the recognition that their relationship will always be fragile and, at times, uncomfortable in this present age.

Without wishing simply to repeat all that has been said already in this chapter, what our deliberations have brought us to is a truly Christian, justice-focussed, eudaimonist ethic: one that is alive to the complexities and tensions within Breathe's construal of the notion of simple living. Such an ethic enables us to see simple living as a way of promoting positive relationships between people and the planet. It leaves us now only to pull the threads of this thesis together and consider what further avenues of discussion and exploration may be suggested.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

We began with the question, 'how does one live well as a Christian in consumer society?'. This thesis has been an attempt to understand more fully one particular attempt to answer that question in the form of living a more simple life.

i. Summary

We chose to do so through looking at the Breathe network: a loosely connected internet group who come together under the banner of 'less stuff, more life' and describe themselves as existing to, 'connect people who want to live a less consumerist, more generous, more sustainable life'. Our first main chapter, therefore, was an investigation into the people who are affiliated with Breathe in order to gain a deeper insight into what sort of people they are; what they see simplicity as entailing and what they are doing to outwork that; how they view consumerism, and what their understanding is of how living a more simple life forms a helpful response to such consumerism.

The empirical research revealed an articulate and highly attuned group of people with a clear understanding of the rationale behind the particular choices in their everyday lives that they were making. This rationale came from three places. Firstly, it arose from an intense discomfort with global and local problems of poverty, inequality and ecological degradation and an awareness that this is partly caused by a consumerist lifestyle that consumes more than its fair share of the earth's resources. Secondly, it came from a heightened appreciation of the negative impacts that consumerism has on the individual and a perception that a life built on consumer values is detrimental to wellbeing because it leads to fragmented relationships and time pressures and ultimately is unsatisfying as the agent is taught to pursue happiness through consumption rather than through developing community. Thirdly, undergirding it all was the participants' Christian faith, which placed a strong emphasis on working against injustice and living lives of love and care, and also focussed on the inner life of one's own relationship with God.

Their understanding of what simplicity entails inevitably reflects these three areas. Emphatically, simple living is about responding to the plight of others on a global scale and to ecological problems. Because of the direct link that is made between consumer-based lifestyles and these problems, simple living is seen as generosity towards others, human and non-human. It thus primarily involves reducing one's expenditure and overall consumption so that resources (both personal in terms of time and money, and more generally) can be released for the benefit of those others. Accompanying this is a desire to ensure that, where consumption does occur, it is undertaken ethically. For participants, therefore, much of what simplicity is about concerns one's attitude towards, and use of, money and other material goods. Alongside global concerns runs an interest in local community and the building of friendships. Time is thus an important factor in simplicity, with participants wanting to counteract a culture that absorbs time into long working hours, watching television and shopping by deliberately choosing to spend their time on their relationships with others and with God. This idea of 'deliberately choosing' highlights the active nature of simple living: it is undertaken not only to retreat from the negative impacts of consumer society (*anachoresis*) but also to engage actively with the problems of the world (noting the potential criticism that focussing on lifestyle alone is not the way to engage most effectively), fostering positive relationships (*koinonia*).

It was keenly felt by participants that living in this way put them at odds with both the wider society and the Church, and so did not always make for comfortable living. The notion of sacrifice, therefore, was important to retain and the role of Breathe as a supportive and encouraging network was highlighted as something that they appreciated.

Following the empirical research we then needed to locate the research findings contextually in order to understand more fully the desire to live a more simple life. We saw Breathe as standing within three particular discursive frameworks. The first was globalisation, which has led to the global problems to which our participants are seeking to respond. After an overview of the four 'faces' of globalisation and how they related to Breathe, we then highlighted the political implications of Beck's 'risk

society' thesis and saw how Breathe stands within the sphere of 'sub-politics' articulated by Beck, using their lifestyle choices as ways of 'thinking politically privately' (Micheletti). The second was consumerism more specifically, which has led to the more existential issues with which Breathe members struggle and their concerns over thin relationships. We explored the main ways of approaching consumerism and considered where such approaches were corroborated by the research and then examined Bauman's notion of 'liquid modernity' and how it reflected many of Breathe's concerns, whilst also recognising its weaknesses. Finally, we looked at the ecclesiological context and saw the various strands that have woven together to produce Breathe's emphases: the writings of people such as Sider and Foster; a new weight placed on environmental concerns within theology; the rediscovery of the rich heritage of monasticism; the long-standing tradition of Christian simplicity and radical dissent, and contemporary discussions around the place of ecclesiology and formation within a consumer society.

As we finished this chapter we noted that Breathe's attempts to live more simply resulted in some significant tensions and extremes that they were trying to avoid. Chapter Four was an investigation of these dangers – a therapeutic Christianity focussed on self; an attitude of material world-denial, and a move to retreat into an oppositional enclave – and then a consideration of how a eudaimonist ethic enables us to find a path through this theologically, looking at Aristotle's foundations and then the further development undertaken by Aquinas. This concept was deemed helpful because of the positive approach to simple living taken by the research participants: living in this way is about flourishing, of self and of others (including the wider creation) and of one's relationship with God. It also brings into conversation consumer society's search for happiness; the underlying question of where such happiness is to be found, and the place of money and material goods within this.

The notion of a virtuous life was found to be especially helpful and, because of the emphases that arose from the empirical research, the virtues of temperance and justice were focussed on, particularly the relationship between the two. Here we found it constructive to distinguish between admirable self-restraint and a Thomist conception of temperance, which is only such when enlarged by justice. The holding

157

together of these virtues (alongside the other virtues) gives to Breathe's understanding of simplicity its specifically Christian framework. We have seen that Breathe holds a holistic conception of simplicity, deeming it to be about one's relationship with God, self, other people and the wider creation. A simple life of frugality can be undertaken for each one of these aspects individually, but it is only by holding them together as vital constituents of a life moving towards God that the everyday choices our research participants are making can be described as truly Christian.

ii. Personal Reflections

As highlighted in the Introduction, this research was undertaken because the idea and practice of simplicity is something that is of deep personal interest. It is the path that my husband and I have chosen, and we have done so out of growing involvement in social justice issues both globally and locally and in issues of earth care, and out of our understanding of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. Whilst there are many books that have been written on these issues and a number of key popular books on simple living, there is little on simplicity at an academic level and so the opportunity to explore that more fully was – and continues to be – an inspiring one.

When I began the research I had almost no idea what direction it would take. I chose the route of empirical research on Breathe as a helpful way into the subject but did not know what would then emerge. This thesis has been very much like taking tentative steps forward into the dark with a small candle that only illuminates the way ahead as one steps into it. Doing so, therefore, has required a certain degree of bravery as one generally prefers the way ahead to be well lit. However, it has been exciting observing the research and my own thinking develop and seeing the different threads coming together to form a coherent pattern, particularly in Chapter Four.

The choice of Aquinas as my main theological conversation partner arose from an initial idea that Aristotle's doctrine of the mean might have something important to speak into Breathe's constant articulation of the word 'enough' and the idea that simplicity is about holding a middle ground between poverty and excess. The doctrine of the mean is still productive and is something that I have drawn on, but it became

clear that Aristotle helpfulness was predominantly in pointing me towards Aquinas and his development of the notion of *eudaimonia*. Initially, my intention was to develop a 'theology of simplicity', but as the research developed I saw that, amidst all the many pressing issues that were emerging, the issues around how one holds together a concern for self with a concern for others were pivotal for understanding a specifically Christian outworking of simple living.

It is interesting to note that my framing of temperance and of its relationship to the other virtues, particularly justice, carries a strong autobiographical note. In particular, whilst recognising the many joys of living simply, it reflects the struggles that I have wrestled with through my choice to live a materially restrained life. This thesis has thus been personally beneficial in speaking to my own experience and enabling me to think theologically about the challenges of my own way of life.

One particular weakness of the empirical research needs to be highlighted, and that is my framing of the questions around consumerism in entirely negative terms. I approached the research assuming that simple living is a response to a consumerism that can only be seen as bad. There is much in that that still holds: the challenges of consumer values are considerable and the research participants vocalised that through their reiteration of the 'stuff verses people' theme. However, I have come to see that reality is more nuanced and that people can use consumerism for positive as well as negative ends. My questioning only allowed participants to articulate the problems within consumerism and my research would have benefited from a question that asked what they also saw as positives. Following on from this, my discussion in Chapter Two on a 'new materialism' provided fertile ground for some further questioning in the interviews and to have done so would have allowed me to explore this interesting area more fully.

Despite this flaw, my research findings are significant because this thesis is the first academic work that has been undertaken solely on a Christian understanding of simplicity and, to my knowledge, the first time that a Thomist framework of virtue ethics has been applied specifically to this area. In doing this I have moved away from my research findings (nobody mentioned Aquinas) in order to develop my own

proposals. As noted in the Introduction to Chapter Four, the question of how these ideas might translate back into my own ecclesiological setting is germane, but I believe the answer to be positive. Unrelated to this thesis, in recent years I have adopted a virtue ethic approach to my speaking on lifestyle issues, often working through some of the key virtues to ask what our lives would look like, and what sort of actions we might undertake, were we to live lives of courage, hope, love, justice, wisdom, frugality etc in relation to, say, food and consumer goods. Such an approach has been very well received, primarily because it moves people away from a list of ethical 'dos and don'ts' into a framework that allows people to respond appropriately according to their situation, recognising the intense complexities of these issues. It is also fundamentally community-orientated: to reach conclusions on how we live the virtues in today's globalised and consumerist society requires that we wrestle with, and live out, these things together.

iii. Avenues for Further Thought

As already indicated, academic research into Christian simplicity is a new area and so there are a number of avenues for further work that this research points to. I highlight three.

Firstly, there is interesting empirical research to be done on the consumer and financial habits of Christians. As we have seen, the Christian faith should lead to a marked approach to money and material goods, one that may lead to an embracing of poverty as a way of life, but that should certainly lead to money being seen as a gift in order to help others, both human and non, and not as something that can be used *ad infinitum* to better one's own life.[329] That being the case, one might expect the Christian's life in respect to this to be different to those around them. Whether or not this is the case would be a valuable piece of research for the Church.

Secondly, I am aware that despite highlighting three 'tensional relationships' in Chapter Four, much of the theological work that followed concentrated on the first two and did not focus on the issues involved in the third danger of retreating into an

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[329] The contrasting approach of Prosperity Theology has not been explored here. A good discussion of it is provided by L. Hartman in, "An Ethics of Consumption: Christianity, Economy, and Ecology" (chapter 3).

oppositional enclave. Of course, there is already a significant body of literature that exists around the debate of how Christians relate to the society of which they are a part, Hunter being one of the most recent commentators to enter the fray.[330] Nonetheless, the attitude that our Breathe members take towards the wider culture remains ambivalent and the practice of simple living would benefit by closer attention being paid to this area.

Thirdly, the research highlighted that, as Breathe members seek to maintain the rhythm of engagement and withdrawal, so their relationship with the wider church continues to be a source of tension. Breathe itself, located as it is in the virtual world, is too thin a community to be able to equip people fully and help them to combat consumerism most effectively, although as seen previously, it can be a good source of encouragement and challenge. What is required are communities that operate as sites of counter-formation and that carry out that formation more effectively than does the community of consumerism. Such communities become the space in which the rhythm of engagement and withdrawal is held together as a regular part of its life. Questions about ecclesiology and Christian formation have been touched on throughout this thesis but never fully expanded upon. Some work has been done in this area already, but continued thoughtful engagement is needed.[331]

iv) Final Words: Life 'in via'

In his book on Aquinas, Healy states, 'the function of all the virtues is to give us dispositions to act well as we face the contingencies of the Christian life in via'.[332] Throughout this thesis we have been exploring one particular outworking of how one might attempt to 'act well' as the Christian life is lived out in consumer society.

Living a simple life is anything but simple. It involves an understanding of the society in which that life is lived and an engagement with the many complexities of our globalised world. It means walking finely between a number of significant tensions,

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[330] J. Hunter, *To Change The World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World*.
[331] J. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview and Cultural Formation*, is one example of such thinking, as is the ongoing work of J. Clark in his PhD thesis on formation in consumer society provisionally entitled, '*The Double Movement of Evangelicalism*: The relationship of Late Modern Capitalist Market Societies to Evangelicalism and the implications for Concrete Missional Ecclesiologies'.
[332] N. Healy, *Thomas Aquinas: Theologian of the Christian Life*, 155.

and often means finding oneself at odds both with the wider society and with one's own ecclesiological context.

Ambiguities are a constant feature of simple living - 'what is enough?' is never finally answered - and yet it is a way of life that is pregnant with the potential to negotiate successfully how to live a faithful Christian life within the constraints of consumer society. Martin has said that Augustine's monastic community, 'witnessed to the "art of the possible", what can be done while still on pilgrimage', and I believe that the life lived more simply witnesses to the same.[333]

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[333] T. Martin, 'Augustine and the Politics of Monasticism', in, J. Doody, K. Hughes and K. Paffenroth, *Augustine and Politics*, 184.

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QUESTIONS USED IN QUESTIONNAIRE ON SURVEY MONKEY

1. Introduction
1. What is your age?
- ◯ Under 20
- ◯ 20 - 39
- ◯ 40 - 59
- ◯ 60 - 79
- ◯ 80+

2. What is your gender?
- ◯ Male
- ◯ Female

3. What is your ethnic background?

4. Where do you live?

5. What is your work occupation?

6. What is your income range?

2. Your Involvement With Breathe
1. How long have you been involved with Breathe?
- ◯ Under a year
- ◯ 1 year
- ◯ 2 years
- ◯ 3 years
- ◯ 4+ years

2. Have you been to any of the Breathe gatherings? If so, which ones?
- ☐ I haven't been to any
- ☐ I have been to a London gathering
- ☐ I have been to a regional gathering

3. Have you taken the Breathe 'Promise of Life'?
- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

4. How important were the following in drawing you to Breathe?

	Most important	Of some importance	Less significant	Of no importance

I wanted an opportunity to connect with like-minded people	○	○	○	○
They were talking about issues that interested me	○	○	○	○
I was feeling frustrated with my life and wanted help to change	○	○	○	○

Other

3. Your Views on Consumerism
1. What do you think are the main problems with consumerism (tick as many or as few options as you like)?

☐ It is using up the earth's resources too quickly

☐ It is using the earth's resources unfairly

☐ It creates an economic imbalance between those who produce and those who consume

☐ It is only interested in money, not in social or ecological good

☐ It produces a society that is too busy and pressured

☐ It creates a distance between ourselves and the products we buy with the result that we don't know where they have come from or what conditions they were produced in

☐ It produces people who are predominantly interested in themselves

☐ It creates a monochrome society

☐ It creates people who don't know how to stick at relationships, thus contributing to the breakdown of families

☐ It produces a Christian culture that is more interested in 'getting' from church than in 'receiving'

☐ It creates Christians who 'church hop' rather than commit to one church

☐ It has de-skilled us, so that we no longer know how to produce things ourselves

☐ We have become addicted to technology

☐ It cultivates a lack of thankfulness in us

☐ It squeezes out space for God

☐ Other

2. Looking at the list again, please tick the three which you think are the most important.

☐

4. Your Views on Simple Living

1. Breathe calls itself, 'a simpler living network'. Can you explain in a couple of sentences what you think simple living is?

2. Please identify which of the following statements most explain why you want to live your life more simply?

	Most importance	Of some importance	Of little significance	Not important
I see it as a way of standing against consumer society	○	○	○	○
It helps me prioritise time for relationships	○	○	○	○
I want to lighten my ecological impact on the world	○	○	○	○
Because it is part of how we can address the economic imbalances between rich and poor people	○	○	○	○
Because I want stillness and time for God	○	○	○	○

Other

3. What first inspired you to begin thinking about living more simply?
☐ The example of a friend
☐ A book
☐ A church sermon or seminar
☐ A TV programme
☐ An historical example
☐ Other

If it was a book, TV programme, historical example or 'other', please specify

4. What things have you done to try to live more simply (tick as many or as few as are appropriate)?
- ☐ Earn a lower salary
- ☐ Give more money away
- ☐ Live with others/invite others to live with you
- ☐ Own less things/give things away regularly
- ☐ Share possessions with others
- ☐ Reduce the amount of clothes you buy
- ☐ Reduce your car and air travel
- ☐ Grow your own produce/make your own things
- ☐ Support local businesses
- ☐ Become involved in your community
- ☐ Consciously make time for friends
- ☐ Give time to helping those more needy than you
- ☐ Find ways to lower your ecological footprint
- ☐ Set aside regular time for spiritual engagement
- ☐ Other

5. What resources have you drawn on to encourage you along the way?
- ☐ The example of a person I know
- ☐ A particular Bible story or verse
- ☐ The Desert Fathers/Mothers
- ☐ The Celts
- ☐ A particular contemporary writer
- ☐ A contemporary group or movement
- ☐ Other

6. FINALLY! As part of this research I would like to conduct several more in-depth interviews. Would you be willing for me to talk with you? If so, please leave your contact details here.

APPENDIX II

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

A. Personal Journey
1. Tell me about your involvement with Breathe
(how long have you been involved with Breathe? What attracted you to them? What does it mean to you to be involved with them? What do you get from/like about being linked with them?)

2. And can you tell me about your interest in the idea of simplicity?
(How long have you been on this journey for? What got you started? How has that developed over the years?)

3. What do you like about it the most? What do you think you've gained from it?

4. What have been some of the hardest things about trying to live simply?

5. What/who have been the main influences in your attempts to walk a path of simplicity? Tell me about them…

6. Can you give me some words that would sum up your journey and what you're trying to do?

Have they said enough about themselves and their journey?

B. On Simplicity
1. What do you think simplicity is? What do you think are its main elements?

2. Out of everything you've said, what would you say is the most important: do you think there is one component, without which it wouldn't be 'simplicity'?

3. Do you see simplicity as something that has arisen as a specific response to consumerism? Do you think simplicity is something that is only relevant for those who are relatively well-off?

Have they spelt out the relationship that they see between the social/ecological/spiritual? Is one more important to them than the others?

C. Simplicity and Christianity

1. Do you think there is such a thing as a 'Christian simplicity'?
(and, if so, what makes it such?)

2. Do you see a biblical/theological basis for simplicity? Tell me about that…
(what about OT, NT, Church teaching, a theologian?)

3. If the word 'simplicity' didn't exist, can you think of a different word/title that would sum up what you are talking about here?

Have you drawn out enough of their biblical/theological understanding?

D. Simplicity and the Church
1. Are you a part of a local church? What is it and how often do you go?

2. Has your church involvement been an important factor in your journey with simplicity?

3. Does your church reflect the same biblical understanding/theology that you talked about earlier?
(If not, has that led to a certain degree of dissatisfaction? Can you identify what you're dissatisfied about – is it their lack of engagement with consumerism, or with ecological issues, or social justice…? How have you dealt with those dissatisfactions? Does Breathe help with that in any way?)

4. Do you think simplicity has something to contribute to the wider Church?

(5. What do you think is the relationship between simplicity and basic Christian discipleship?)

Finally:
Is there anything else you'd like to tell me, either about Breathe or simplicity in general, that hasn't been brought out by these questions?

APPENDIX III

SAMPLE TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEWS

Involvement with Breathe…
I met Phil Whittall at the New Frontiers youth festival week, because I was working on a global café to do with my Isaiah 58 justice group that I'd started at church. And we had somehow got put forward – or we had suggested – running a global awareness themed café at this huge festival. So when me and a few of the Isaiah 58 crew turned up Phil Whittall was managing overall the café venue. And so we got to know each other and discovered an awful lot of common interests and very much, because we were both within the New Frontiers movement at that stage, where the issues of social justice are perhaps not as in the foreground as they might be in other churches, so we both went on a bit of a, 'right brilliant, we're friends in this campaign together, let's see what we can do'.

And then after that we became friends and he invited me along to the retreat weekends where he and Mark Powley and a few others we all kind of… they'd already had the idea and concept of Breathe, and that weekend was a, 'oh what shall we do with it?'. They'd had the idea and they'd been doing their own things in their own churches for a while, but could we make it bigger?

What were those common interests/what attracted you?
For me from a social justice background it was the, we're in a privileged position here in this country with all the resources we've got to make a difference, and the Old Testament prophets (you know, 'speak up for those who haven't got a voice', from Proverbs, and Isaiah 58: 'this is what I call a fast') in terms of worship and fasting and looking out for those who are poor, vulnerable, oppressed in any way. And, I don't know really at what point my awareness of just the impact that we have here by… the way we live in this country has an impact on people all over the world: the obvious stuff like Fair Trade. That's a no-brainer for me: we can buy things, we need to buy things here, we buy food, and how can we buy food that we know has been produced under terrible conditions where people aren't paid properly?

So, yeah, it was that sort of thing of social justice but for me it wasn't so much for me the local feel of helping homeless people in my town, it's always been this more global thing which is obviously the connection with Breathe and the consumerism ties in because of the whole planet affect.

Anything more on where your interest in simplicity came from
I think it's the two things: as a person, just in growing up as a teenager, in my twenties etc, I've just naturally not particularly been into materialism culture. So I was never one for the brands and all the stuff, just with the friends I had none of us were really into that, the jobs that I've had with charities, just means that that less materialistic, less extravagant in terms of material stuff, those issues have not particularly grabbed me.

And then I became a Christian at thirty and it's like, all of those things that I knew were important suddenly fell into place in the bigger picture and relationship with

God. So as a Christian (as a new Christian) those issues just were there immediately, about questioning the way we live today and, you know, what it is that we're doing by just in modern living? It just fitted somehow with how I understood God and what Jesus was about and… the issues of idolatry and materialism becoming an idol somehow just made sense to me really early on. Yeah, it's almost like it then made sense of how I had thought as a non-Christian perhaps. See, look, there's a bigger spiritual picture going on.

What do you gain/the positives?
By not being a slave to things, for example talking about ironing *[we were talking about that before the interview]* as an example. It's so complicated: if you have to iron something that you've just washed it just adds that extra element of complication to life, it takes your time, it's the resources, you need the object of the ironing board and the iron, the electricity, the water softener because the water's too hard to go into the [iron]. Every single thing seems to complicate something that's really straight-forward: clean clothes that you wear! So the sense of what's valuable in my life, and having an item of clothing that hasn't got a little crease in it isn't valuable to me. And if you prioritise what's really important or valuable in your life (and I would put in things, you know, my faith, my family, all of the obvious stuff), well how does ironing a shirt contribute to any of those things? It doesn't, but it sucks up my time.

And with Breathe, either the sort of where we try, running seminars and things and helping each other and getting on these little retreats, is almost like to identify the things that are stealing us away from the things that are really important. So, theoretically, living simply should free you up for the things that are really valuable. So, if you're buying less stuff then it frees your money to give in to something that's more valuable, e.g. social justice, or travelling to see my family.

Challenges/difficulties?
Resisting the temptation of nice things! You know, at the minute I'm lucky because I'm working in a school where my commute to work doesn't take me past a shop that's useful. But I know, when I was working in Chichester… so every lunchtime and after lunch I was having to go between work and home through the whole high street. And things looked lovely. And of course, 'oh that's pretty, oh that's nice, oh I need that'. If you see it it's kind of the temptation. So I think the hardest thing is just not being lured back into it all really.

It's all the advertising: 'oh I could do with that extra pairs of secateurs that will do something slightly different to the existing pair that I've already got', just because I see the advert in Robert Dyas for them.

Words to describe the way you're trying to live…
'Simple' is the first obvious one. Generous, thoughtful, planet-minded, people-minded. Yeah, those are probably the main ones.

Influences…
Well, the individuals of Phil and Mark massively. And the others who I met out of that grouping who I'm less in touch with now. And exchanging stories of what we're all trying to do has just been really lovely. So when we've got together and we've run the

conferences up in London or had these little weekends away in Oxford, it's been lovely, so inspiring. You know you go along to one of those gatherings and I've always come away thinking, 'I love what Phil's been trying to do with his local neighbourhood about sharing their possessions'. I feel very inspired by that and what can we do here?'

I think my work at Christian Aid massively influential, again both the personal side of things, so working with people (you know, birds of a feather flock together type of thing). Naturally, the type of people who are working for international development tend not to be driving porsches etc etc, and the Christian side of it, feeling that you can learn from people who've got an incredible faith life and are travelling around the world spending time helping people who've got materially very little and spiritually a lot, because in a real place of need we'll draw closer to God.

I experienced that when I went to Congo and one of the clichés I suppose was really understanding, seeing it for myself, spending time (three weeks) with people who had nothing and sort of had an awful lot more in many ways than we have here. Just in terms of their faith, appreciating what they do have, which is so important. If you have less you'll appreciate what you've got. So yeah, my work at Christian Aid on the personal side and the travelling. And then also the bigger aims and ambitions of Christian Aid, so the obvious stuff to help those who were living in poverty.

But more recently, with climate change in particular, we were starting really to try to work out, 'what do we mean by helping, if we're about development but we can see the way we have developed in the West being so destructive to the planet and then to communities. What on earth is it we are trying to do for people? How do we marry these things? Because we cannot hope every single person on the planet will have this kind of western lifestyle because it won't work'. So working there introduced me to the matching up, I suppose, the theological, social justice, what does being a consumer mean for us long term?

Is there any reading you've done?
John Stott, *Issues Facing Christians Today*, internal stuff like at Christian Aid (awful lot of material, reports and Paula Clifford who's sort of on the theological studies side – her material – and a chap called Peter Grayston – lovely guy- who wanted very much to introduce social justice issues into our worship in church, on a Sunday in our prayers and worship, and looking at the Old Testament where these things were always brought in about crying out for those who were suffering. We don't do that in church today, why not? Well we do, in our intercessory prayers, but we don't somehow bring it into our worship songs, that sort of thing). So, material that they put together.

I think I got about half way through, *Rich Christians in An Age of Hunger* (never quite managed all of it!). Not Christian, but Oliver James, *Affluenza.* Shame he's not a Christian. I don't know if he isn't I assume he's not. That sort of puts all of it together very nicely and it gives you the statistical research, data-gathering side of what I feel to be true.

What is simplicity?

Right, so I suppose, absolute simplicity is something to do with what's absolutely necessary. But in a joyful, sort of God-intended, blessed, abundant life. So it's something to do with those two things, because you can say, 'well if you strip everything down to what's necessary: bread and water, that'll do us', but somehow that's not joyful enough. So simplicity should be quite life-giving: if it's not life-giving then there's something perhaps not right.

Thinking about fasting: I was reading something about 'fasting is giving up what we really want', and I'm like, 'no I don't agree with that', because what we really want is full life with God for loving relationships. I'm not going to give that up – don't be so daft! Maybe fasting is giving up what we *think* we want, what unhelpful influences are telling us we want. So perhaps simplicity is stripping away the delusions of what we think we want to be happy in today's life, and getting back down to what's necessary and life-giving. Having never thought about what is simplicity!

Has simplicity has arisen as response to consumerism?
For me, yes, and I think as 'today's Christian'… so, personally, I've got a lot out of reading sort of wisdom and writings and life etc of older believers through the ages, like the monastic type movement where you think, 'my goodness, the way we live is just on a different planet virtually to how they used to live'. And one of the main differences seems to be consumerism and so if I (maybe sentimentally) look at the Iona community as it was, or maybe any monastic community properly, and the poverty element - so voluntary poverty – is something that we just don't particularly do now. So I think definitely it's the consumerism that is the bothersome thing for me. And yeah, it does… it clutters things up and it causes you to spend your money in ways that you don't really need.

Is it only relevant to those who are relatively well off?
I don't know… because I am relatively well off I probably can only genuinely answer that from my perspective, and sort of don't want to sentimentalise what someone else might experience. At the minute, in church, we're doing (well, a few of us)… have decided that starting four weeks before Easter we're fasting our disposable income. And the way we've chosen to do it is we'll work out what we would get if we were living on benefits and that's what we'll live on for those four weeks, and everything in between that amount and our income gets given away to charity. When we presented it to church, a few people have said, 'oh I'm already living on benefits, so you know, that excludes me from giving to charity', so it's quite like, I'm not in a position particularly to sort of say… I don't know what it's like to live on benefits because I haven't since I was about twenty, and it's very different when you've got children and a house and stuff.

But I think that simplicity – in terms of what you're spending your time on – obviously still counts because it's not all about money: simplicity is also about things like ironing. It doesn't cost you money really, but it still complicates your life. So yes, I think simplicity can and does apply to everyone, it's just going to look very different according to your income.

Is there a Christian simplicity?

196

I guess there's going to be just a different, an extra dimension to it. So fasting, is going to, as a Christian has got just an awful lot more meaning and sense to it so non-Christians do give up something for Lent, but that tends to be perhaps just almost a knee-jerk reaction, not really thinking about it, 'oh well it'll be better for my waistline if I give up chocolate', or whatever. Obviously fasting, we might give up chocolate, but it's always God-focussed, so when I want a bit of chocolate I will actually pray, think about God, so it's got that extra dimension.

And I guess it's the same with simplicity overall. That when we're choosing to live more simply – whether that's to do with not buying stuff or not spending time on the internet when we could be engaging with people in a different way etc etc – then hopefully it's all part of our following Jesus and being true to what he was teaching us about life.

Biblical basis?
So we've got Jesus' teachings of things like, 'why do you worry about what you're going to wear? Look outside at the birds and the lilies, they don't worry about this stuff, so why are you worrying about it?', and that sense of how does that help you be closer to God? We've got the giving away, sharing all that you've got, the Acts model of church as we saw, they had everything in common, that they shared.

Old Testament (can't remember where it is now), where the idea of (it was gathering manna wasn't it), 'gather as much as you need for today', and the way it works is that then there'll be enough. Everyone will have enough. Don't gather too much because it will rot. And leaving the sides of the fields for the poor people to come and gather. So it's like, 'great, you're rich, you've got a whole field, good for you. But just leave the edges'. So it just feels like all the way through, and if you're thinking about the natural planet and the resources you've got on it, if nobody gathers too much then there is enough for everyone.

And then, how did Jesus live? Well he didn't live in a rich materialistic way. So, you know, it's not the whole story but it's another indication of he was showing us that full life is possible without being the rich person in the huge mansion, surrounding yourself with stuff, and you surround yourself with people instead.

If word simplicity didn't exist…
Generous, perhaps, is going to be a big one. I sort of want to say pure, but then that has connotations of, you know, the moral righteousness type of idea, but if you think of pure – distilled, there you go, maybe distilled is a better word. But, yeah, we need simplicity! It's a good word!

Has your church involvement over the years been an important factor…
Well yes, because church involvement I believe is an essential part of being a Christian. Being a Christian is all part of my development and my understanding of simplicity, but it's possibly more that my involvement in church… well I bring with me as an individual member this desire and belief in its importance, so I've kind of brought it into the churches that I've been part of. The first church I was in (like I've said) it wasn't on the kind of public corporate agenda really, and so it was an

incredibly important part of my individual membership of my church – I felt – and, you know, the others who also joined me in that kind of mini-mission.

The church I'm at now, I would say there's much more common agreement of these issues, or people are also living in that sort of understanding and there's been a real enthusiasm for this disposable income fast for Lent, so I think that's really encouraging. And so, it would help, because obviously the more people that are involved in something that you're doing, perhaps, I need the help and support, I'm not very good at doing things on my own. So yes, it is important on that because it, possibly, this idea of the benefits living was somebody else at church who said, 'come on then, you going to do it or what?', so 'right, yes, let's'. So if Mark hadn't suggested it for this year, probably wouldn't be trying it.

When part of the NFI church, was your involvement with Breathe an important factor for you?
Ummm probably in the encouragement stakes, yes, because it is isolating and depressing to think, 'am I the only person in New Frontiers who thinks about this stuff?', and then obviously meeting Phil was like, 'yay, there's light elsewhere, there's two of us!'. There was definitely that kind of, 'phew, it's not just me, I'm not an idiot', and I knew that because, with the Isaiah 58 thing, although it had a different angle, for me I think it's all part of the same thing: the more simply you live in your own life then the more time and money etc you have to give away and help the social justice agenda overseas. So I knew from the people who were joining up with what I was doing with Isaiah 58 group, it wasn't just me in New Frontiers, but knowing that elsewhere around the country, with Phil, and also then feeling a bit more equipped. You know, I was a young Christian, I was like learning, learning, learning, and when I met Phil I was, say, maybe three years into being a Christian at that stage, he brought with him like I could learn from his years of faith and all of the thinking and *[tape ends]*

Getting from Phil of all the years of his thinking and learning and praying and living and friendships with Mark and others, so yes, I gained an awful lot from Breathe to then bolster and encourage what I was doing in the New Frontiers church in Brighton.

Does simplicity have anything to contribute to the wider church?
I hope so, yeah. I struggle with it when I… there's an amazing church in Bradford that runs women's conferences (the Abundant Life Centre) and their teaching is incredible, their worship is… they're so God-focussed and their social justice ministry to the local community is amazing. There is no needy, vulnerable group in Bradford who they are not engaged with in some absolute hands-on committed way. But they're also incredibly materialistic. Their view of The House of God is that the church should have the best: it's the house of God so yes we should have beautiful furniture that costs a fortune and all this sort of thing. And I still struggle with it. You know, the church leaders should drive fantastic, impressive cars because why not? So part of their abundant life idea is material abundance. And, so they're a part of the wider church in this country and in terms of simplicity (as I would see it) they're, you know, it's not a word that they would particularly embrace [laughs] and yet it doesn't affect the incredible things that they're doing.

So, yeah, tough one, don't know…

Relationship between simplicity and basic Christian discipleship?
Personally I feel there has to be and my desire to live a simple life as a Christian is rooted in my understanding that it is part of being a disciple. So (as I said), all of the biblical foundation for… so I find it really hard to marry up: 'it's harder for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven, blah blah blah…'. So, yeah, it feels like, not living a simple life gets in the way of our closeness to God, as the cliché in going somewhere like Congo where people have that close relationship to God because of their poverty (or maybe the poverty contributes to it in some way), and yet the Abundant Life crew have no poverty among them (in terms of the leadership) but equally I can't criticise their discipleship. So yeah, I think it's a bit confusing.

Oooh, one thing to add: the bit (that in terms of that discipleship and the materialism of one area or group of people compared to another) is that whole impact on the planet, and I think that's possibly where it comes in. Where, like buying Fair Trade: how can you not buy FairTrade once you're aware of it? How can you choose not to and still be a loving disciple of Christ? So, how can we keep on buying all this stuff that's churning out of factories in China, eating up the world's natural resources, causing climate change, creating poverty or sustaining poverty in sub-Saharan Africa etc etc etc, and still feel that we're loving those communities? So that's probably the element that church groups or individuals need to be aware of in order to join up the dots. Because the Abundant Life example, the way that they live has no impact whatsoever on their hands-on ministry to the poor people in Bradford. However, the awareness of the impact of poor people in Mali (say) might make the difference in how they would choose to live.

Anything else?
I was reminding myself this morning of the *Promise of Life* which, every time I read it, I just absolutely think, 'yes, and which bit of this am I not doing very much at the minute?'. And the one thing that leapt out of me today that I think, 'oh, we're not doing this at the minute: share freely our homes and our things', and this concept of simplicity and generosity, for me they're all linked in. So, if my life is less complicated and hurried and full of the unhelpful bits and pieces then I should have more time and space for inviting people into share what I've got and not have to worry about it being a great big fancy complicated thing, it's just, 'come and have baked beans on toast after church. I'm not going to not invite you because I haven't got a roast in the oven'. Simplicity and generosity sort of coming together at that stage. It's got to be the two things, and I think that's what I like with Breathe: it isn't just about stripping down in my own little life and my own little family. That's the first step perhaps, but it's got to then lead on to turning it outwards, whether that means giving money, sharing, lending all the reams of stuff that we've got (we don't all need a lawnmower; shouldn't we be able to share each other's? etc), inviting people in. So yeah, it's got to be the two things, you can't just simplify your own existence without turning it outwards.

Also, I haven't really talked about the earth/environment stuff so much because that just goes as read to me: it's so obvious I've hardly even talked about it.