5.1 Introduction

The Lighthouse Christian Fellowship, as with all congregations, is the product of its context as well as its theology. In addition to the practical-theological model which comes from this study, the congregation’s context reveals something about the expression of Pentecostalism in heavily populated, urban areas of the UK. My findings reflect a Pentecostal response to post-Christianity and increasing atheism/agnosticism and reveal the experiences of a group of people within this context finding and expressing faith. This study is a contribution to the growing pool of UK congregational studies, in response to Labanow’s call for a plurality of different congregational studies available in order to give researchers and practitioners a wealth of resources from which to work.1

This chapter marks the first of two to present the analysis of original data and my findings from this congregational study. As conversion is interpreted and experienced within a particular context, I begin by painting a picture of LCF’s geographical and sociological location as an urban congregation in twenty-first century Birmingham, UK and also its historical context as a branch of the Elim movement. I then draw from my participant-observation, analysis of congregational literature and sermons in order to describe and explain the present day congregation’s theology of conversion. This involves presenting conversion theology from the ecclesial level of discourse, that is, as the congregation (as part of a wider movement) presents it both internally and externally.2 This requires not only the interpretation of the verbal transmission of beliefs and values through teaching, but also of the embodied experiences during worship, ritual, evangelistic activities and the process of discipleship.

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2 This includes analysis of the official Elim magazine Direction, as it is sold and endorsed by LCF and therefore informs part of the congregation’s theology and its contents are formally supported by the leadership. The precursor to Direction was the Elim Evangel and occasionally this publication will be referenced in the discussion to highlight its traditional theology and any changes in the movement’s official teaching.
3 Davie and Garnett (et al.) use the end of the Second World War as the key starting point for
Through my analysis of material from these five areas I aim to present the theology of conversion as expressed and supported at LCF as an individual congregation and as part of the broader Elim movement.

I argue that given the congregation's context, the predominant experience of LCF involves conversions from atheists, post-Christians or members of other Christian groups rather than from other religions. The congregation's history is steeped in revival and as such is supportive of dramatic conversion experiences and perceived manifestations of the Spirit. They attend and advertise annual Elim conferences where such experiences are common. However, their teaching and praxis does not present this as being the most important aspect of the Christian life and it is repeatedly expressed that dramatic conversion experiences are only one of many ways that individuals come to faith. I conclude that conversion is not viewed as just a moment but as an ongoing journey of faith, starting with a decision and involving multiple subsequent encounters with God and transformations by the Spirit throughout the convert's life.

In order to understand LCF and its approaches to conversion I begin by exploring Pentecostalism in the context of twenty-first century England, and Birmingham in particular. This shows where people are coming from when they decide to participate in this Pentecostal congregation and what other (non-)religious influences impact their daily lives and experiences.

5.2 Britain’s Religious Landscape: Theories and Context

Since 1945, discussion surrounding the religious landscape of Britain has been characterised by declining church attendance figures and a rise in the presence of other world religions.3 Sociologists of religion have offered numerous and conflicting theories to explain the apparent shift in British religiosity away from organised Christianity; perhaps the two most influential and well known are those of sociologists of religion Grace Davie and Steve Bruce.

Davie interprets the pattern of church attendance decline in the UK not as a decline in Christian belief, but rather a shift in the expression of that belief away from organised congregations. She claims that “the overall pattern of religious life is changing. For it appears that more and more people within British society want to believe but do not want to involve themselves in religious practice”;4 a position she coined as believing-without-belonging. The desire to believe is

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3 Davie notes that this change is due to, among other things, changing religious environments and the increasing diversity of religious life in the UK. (Davie, Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing without Belonging, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994) p. 107.)

4 Davie, Religion in Britain, p. 81.