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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Entrepreneurship in religious organizations: How the Church of England developed an entrepreneurial orientation

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Abstract Prior research established that religion shapes country-level entrepreneurial activity as well as individual-level entrepreneurial decisions. The organizational level has received less research attention. It is particularly unclear how the combination of entrepreneurship and religion is forged in established religious organizations. Through a historical case study of the Church of England's efforts toward developing an entrepreneurial orientation (EO), my paper sheds light on that issue. The findings indicate that, in religious settings, an entrepreneurial orientation materializes through a lengthy, contested process. Two mutually reinforcing mechanisms – polysemy dynamics and idea sedimentation – play an important role in this process. I theorize that these mechanisms, despite delaying EO development, address resistance and thereby drive progress toward a comprehensive entrepreneurial orientation.

Plain English Summary *How do traditional religious organizations end up embracing entrepreneurial ideas? This historical case study of the Church of England answers that question.* Religious organizations, especially those facing decline, are increasingly feeling the pressure to launch entrepreneurial initiatives. When such initiatives are seen as violations of religious beliefs, they tend to be resisted. How religious organizations overcome such resistance, and how they try to combine entrepreneurial and religious principles, is unclear. My study shows that the Church of England became more entrepreneurial after it (1) slowly arrived at a common understanding of what entrepreneurship meant to them and (2) continued building on entrepreneurial ideas that were previously accepted or rejected. The main implication of this study is that, while religious organizations may be slow to combine entrepreneurial and religious values, the process is difficult to stop once it has been set in motion.

Keywords Religion · Entrepreneurship · Entrepreneurial orientation · Church of England: Archival data

JEL Classification M13 · O31 · Z12

1 Introduction

Many entrepreneurs describe themselves as religious (Drakopoulou-Dodd & Seaman, 1998; Liu et al., 2019). Because religion permeates all aspects of people's lives (Smith et al., 2021), these entrepreneurs often run their ventures based on religious values (Essers & Benschop, 2009; Gümüsay et al., 2020). Notwithstanding the importance of religion, research on entrepreneurship and religion has long been

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scarce (Gümüsay, 2015). Recently, this has started to change; there is now a growing body of work studying how religion influences macro-level entrepreneurial phenomena, e.g., entrepreneurial activity within a country, as well as individual-level entrepreneurial decision-making (Rietveld & Hoogendoorn, 2022).

Although our understanding of the macro-level and individual-level impact of religion on entrepreneurship is growing, prior studies largely overlook the organization-level links between religion and entrepreneurship. We know that combining religion and entrepreneurship improves organizational performance (Liu et al., 2019; Pearce et al., 2010). Emerging research also suggests that creating the conditions under which religion and entrepreneurship coalesce is critical (Gümüsay et al., 2020), particularly when entrepreneurial values are newly introduced into an organization (see Al-Tabbaa et al., 2022). Yet, exactly how entrepreneurial and religious values are combined in these situations is unclear.

A better understanding of the adoption of entrepreneurial practices by religious organizations is important for two main reasons. First, the phenomenon is increasingly common; religious organizations, like other nonprofit organizations, more and more frequently feel pressured to take entrepreneurial initiatives (Al-Tabbaa et al., 2022; Fritz & Ibrahim, 2010). Second, from a theoretical viewpoint, studying this process can generate more general insights into how organizations become entrepreneurially oriented – something research to date has failed to explain (Miller, 2011; Wales et al., 2013). Hence, this paper addresses the following research question: *How does the process of developing an entrepreneurial orientation unfold in a religious organization?*

To answer my research question, I conducted an archival study of the Church of England (CofE). From 1980 onwards, the CofE's central legislative body started debating various entrepreneurial initiatives in its efforts to address decline. Using the entrepreneurial orientation (EO) literature as an analytical lens, I tracked how these debates evolved. I identified four phases that differ in terms of the type and number of entrepreneurial initiatives launched and the ideas underpinning them. Progress through the phases was driven by polysemy dynamics and idea sedimentation. Polysemy dynamics, i.e., the broadening and narrowing of definitions assigned to key terms, addressed criticism aimed at initiatives that were regarded as too entrepreneurial or not entrepreneurial enough. Idea sedimentation – the burying and resurfacing of ideas – increased the opportunities advocates of entrepreneurial change had to use prior debates as the basis for new arguments.

These findings have three main theoretical implications. First, I shed new light on the relationship between entrepreneurship and religion. Previous studies establish a *linear* relationship, showing that religion influences entrepreneurial behavior and performance. In contrast, my findings suggest that the relationship can be *recursive*; entrepreneurial and religious values mutually influence each other. Second, I introduce two mechanisms (polysemy dynamics and idea sedimentation) that drive entrepreneurial change within religious organizations. My third contribution is to the entrepreneurial orientation literature, which focuses on what happens before and after EO has emerged and, therefore, overlooks the process of EO development. My results indicate that this process is unlikely to be quick in religious settings. Yet, it may be difficult to stop once it is set in motion.

2 Literature review

2.1 Religion and entrepreneurship

The literature on entrepreneurship and religion consists of two main strands: "studies focusing on the choice of entrepreneurship over wage work and studies analyzing the influence of religion on entrepreneurial decision-making" (Rietveld & Hoogendoorn, 2022: 1314). The first stream of work concludes that religion shapes *whether* people become entrepreneurs; religiosity, through the values and norms it prescribes as well as the social capital it provides (Audretsch et al., 2013; Choi, 2010; Zelekha et al., 2014), increases both country-level and individual-level entrepreneurial activity (Drakopoulou-Dodd & Seaman, 1998; Henley, 2017; Parboteeah et al., 2015). The second line of research shows that religion, because it affects people's outlook on life, shapes the business decisions religious entrepreneurs make (Liu et al., 2019; Pieper et al., 2020). They are, for instance, more likely to display prosocial and sustainability-oriented behaviors (Xu et al., 2022).

Hence, prior research primarily explains how religion influences *macro-level* entrepreneurial activity

and decisions made by *individual* entrepreneurs. A smaller subset of the literature examines how religion and entrepreneurship are combined at the *organizational* level. These studies demonstrate that religion positively affects entrepreneurial activity within organizations (Abdelgawad & Zahra, 2020; Eze et al., 2021; Fritz & Ibrahim, 2010; Sabah et al., 2014). They also suggest that entrepreneurial initiatives launched by religious organizations not only improve the performance of these organizations themselves (Liu et al., 2019; Pearce et al., 2010) but also have wider implications; churches in England, for instance, have fueled the global social enterprise movement (Spear, 2010; Tracey, 2012).

While the combination of religious and entrepreneurial principles benefits many organizations, it does not work for all. There is evidence that, like individual entrepreneurs (Essers & Benschop, 2009; Griebel et al., 2014), organizations may experience tensions between their entrepreneurial and religious identities. These stem from the moral belief that religious institutions are sacred and should, therefore, not get involved in market-related activities (Gümüsay et al., 2020; Yue et al., 2019). The current literature, however, seldom discusses how such tensions are handled. When it does, it focuses on organizations that have always been run according to both religious and entrepreneurial principles (e.g., Gümüsay et al., 2020). Hence, we know very little about what happens when non-entrepreneurial religious organizations attempt to develop an entrepreneurial orientation.

2.2 Entrepreneurial orientation

As Tracey (2012) argued, leveraging the literature on entrepreneurial orientation (EO) has "the potential to provide significant steps forward in our understanding of religious organizations" (Ibid.: 106). The EO literature demonstrates that entrepreneurship is not the exclusive domain of small new ventures (Miller, 2011; Randerson, 2016) but also takes place when established organizations "take calculated risks, innovate, and pursue proactive behaviors" (Putniņš & Sauka, 2020: 712). While it mostly studies the performance effects of EO in for-profit contexts (Anderson et al., 2022; Calabrò et al., 2021; Lomberg et al., 2017; Lumpkin & Dess, 2001; McKenny et al., 2018), EO research provides several insights that have informed my analysis of EO development in a religious organization.

The first relevant insight is that EO can manifest itself in various ways: as top management style, organizational configuration, or new entry initiatives (Kindermann et al., 2023). The latter is the most widely discussed manifestation of EO (Wales et al., 2020) and takes the form of launching new ventures that introduce new products or enter new markets (Lumpkin & Dess, 1996). Top management style is often equated to EO rhetoric, i.e., the "strategic use of words in organizational narratives to convey (…) risk taking, innovativeness, [and] proactiveness" (Watson et al., 2019: 752). Organizational configuration refers to the internal organizational processes – e.g., systems, structures, routines – that support entrepreneurial behavior (Wales et al., 2020).

Second, the EO literature points out that what the dimensions of EO – risk taking, innovativeness, and proactiveness – exactly look like varies within organizations (Miller, 2011); each sub-unit is made up of different employees, with different responsibilities, who may exhibit EO in different manners (Wales, 2016; Wales et al., 2011). Across organizations, there can also be variations. In nonprofits, for instance, EO is directed at the fulfillment of social mission rather than profit optimization (Morris et al., 2011). EO is also more relational and collaborative in nonprofits than it is in for-profit businesses (Al-Tabbaa et al., 2022).

Thirdly, recent studies of EO argue that the orientation of an organization may change over time (Wales, 2016). This is a radical departure from the prior consensus that organizations with similar structures and resources, operating in comparably hostile and dynamic environments (Kreiser et al., 2020; Wales et al., 2013; Wiklund et al., 2009), are "consistently entrepreneurial or conservative" (Anderson et al., 2022: 15). CEOs are depicted as the main agents of change; their willingness to pursue entrepreneurial initiatives varies throughout their tenure (Boling et al., 2016; Grühn et al., 2017).

In sum, I derived three main insights from the EO literature: (1) EO can manifest itself in top management style, in organizational configuration, or in new entry initiatives; (2) the three core dimensions of EO are context dependent, i.e., what is seen as risky, innovative, and proactive differs across settings; and (3) the level of an organization's EO varies over time.

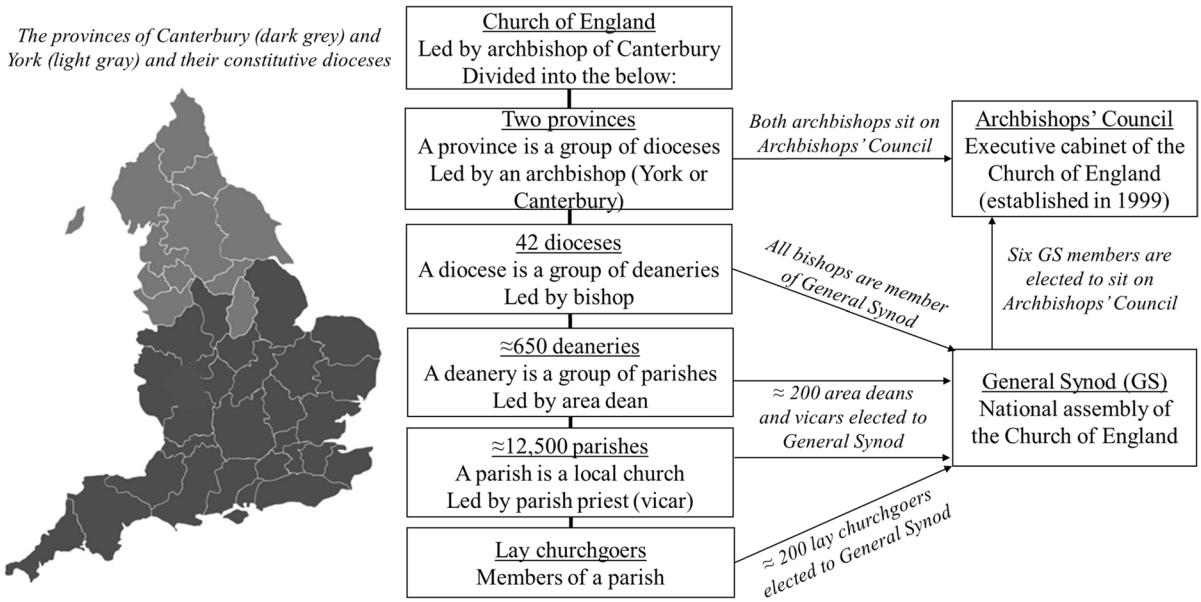

Fig. 1 Structure of the Church of England. Source: Church of England (2022a) and Diocese of Worcester (2022)

Notwithstanding these contributions, the EO literature does not fully explain how EO materializes in religious settings because it mostly studies for-profit businesses (Al-Tabbaa et al., in press; Balasubramanian et al., 2020) and does not pay much attention to the social construction and emergence of EO (e.g., Miller, 2011; Randerson, 2016; Wales et al., 2020).

3 Methods

3.1 Research setting

To answer my research question, I studied entrepreneurial initiatives launched by the Church of England (CofE). The CofE is an interesting context for examining the organization-level links between religion and entrepreneurship because it is a religious organization that, after a long period in which it focused on its usual, community-oriented activities, started developing entrepreneurial initiatives in an attempt to reverse decline (Spear, 2010; Zygan & Le Grys, 2018). Unlike prior research, I was therefore able to analyze whether and how entrepreneurship affects religion, as opposed to the other way around. An additional reason for selecting the CofE is that it keeps detailed records of all decisions it takes, which uniquely allowed me to track the process of EO development.

The CofE is one of the most prominent religious organizations in England: "By virtue of its long history of association with the state, the Church of England regards itself as the Church of the nation" (Zygan & Le Grys, 2018: 541). This status is reflected in the CofE's structure. It is divided into "territorial packages with discrete boundaries" (GS proceedings 1994: 230)[1] that cover the whole of England. Hence, everyone lives close to a church that looks after them, i.e., is tasked with the 'cure of their souls'. Parishes are the smallest 'territorial package'. They are grouped into deaneries, which in turn are combined into dioceses. Each of these layers delegates members to two of the Church's main decision-making bodies: the General Synod (GS) and the Archbishops' Council (see Fig. 1).

3.2 Data sources

I have conducted a historical case study. Historical case analyses are appropriate when examining

[1] Appendix 2 provides the bibliographical details of all archival material referred to in the paper or the appendices.

phenomena that unfold over long periods of time (Augustine & Piazza, 2022). The process of EO development in the CofE did indeed take a long time; according to two experts I interviewed prior to data collection, discussions about decline – which generally triggers entrepreneurial initiatives (Kreiser et al., 2020) – intensified as early as in 1980. Historical case studies are also suitable when researchers intend to observe systems of meaning reflected in specific situations (Hargadon & Douglas, 2001), which fits my aim of analyzing a specific religious organization to understand how religion and entrepreneurship are combined.

The historical data I collected are qualitative, making them suitable for unraveling the processes that lead to organization-level entrepreneurial behaviors (Randerson, 2016; Wales, 2016). The CofE archives were my main data source. I collected documents prepared for, and discussed during, all General Synod (GS) meetings that took place between 1980 and 2020, as well as the minutes of those meetings. GS "considers and approves legislation affecting the whole of the Church of England (…) and approves the annual budget for the work of the Church" (Church of England, 2022b). Hence, my study focuses on a central decision-making body. This is in line with prior research, which situates the responsibility for making EO-related decisions at the top of the organizational hierarchy (Wales et al., 2020).

Following common practice in historical case studies (e.g., Augustine & Piazza, 2022; Boutinot & Delacour, 2022), I triangulated my data. I used Nexis UK to retrieve newspaper articles that covered any of the documents or meetings I collected in the CofE archives. As Nexis UK mostly contains secular newspapers, I also searched the archives of the Church Times, seen as "the main newspaper of the Church of England" (Interviewee #3). Furthermore, I conducted interviews with church planters. Church planting, "the establishment of new Christian congregations" (Foppen et al., 2017: 26), is generally seen as one of the main entrepreneurial activities deployed within the CofE. These interviews provided yet another perspective on EO development in religious organizations. Table 2 in Appendix 1 explains how these data sources were used in the analysis.

3.3 Data analysis[2]

3.3.1 Identifying entrepreneurial initiatives

I began my analysis by creating an overview of the entrepreneurial initiatives discussed during GS meetings. I looked for proposals that were seen as risky, innovative, and proactive – widely regarded as the three main dimensions of EO (Wales et al., 2013). As a religious organization, the CofE was likely to have a different understanding of these dimensions than for-profit businesses (see Pearce et al., 2010). Therefore, instead of predefining each EO dimension, I inductively coded them based on the tone of the GS debates, e.g., I only labeled a proposal as risky when it was regarded as such by those involved. To further ensure that I would not overlook any entrepreneurial initiatives, I drew on recent studies suggesting that EO can manifest itself as top management rhetoric, new entry initiatives, and changes to organizational configuration (Wales et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2021). I identified five entrepreneurial initiatives (see Table 3 in Appendix 1).

3.3.2 Analyzing competing views of entrepreneurial initiatives

As previous research (e.g., Yue et al., 2019) suggests, developing entrepreneurial initiatives can be contentious in religious organizations. To capture such controversy, I adopted an idea-centric perspective, which allows researchers "to pay attention to a variety of ideas – not only to those that eventually become dominant" (Hehenberger et al., 2019: 1676). I examined the ideas underlying opposing perceptions of each entrepreneurial proposal. Looking for opposites enabled me to expose perceptions of entrepreneurship within the CofE that would otherwise have been easy to overlook, such as those that faded away over time or never gained popularity (cf. Hehenberger et al., 2019). Table 1 gives an overview of the main opposites I found (Table 4 in Appendix 1 provides a complete set of quotes illustrating each idea).

[2] While my analysis was iterative, I present it sequentially in the interest of clarity.

Table 1 Ideas in opposition within the Church of England

Idea content		Perspective 1	Perspective 2
Change imperative: *perceived need for the CofE to become entrepreneurial*	Interpretation of declining attendance	Downplaying decline	Acknowledging decline
	Necessity of responding to decline	No urgency in reversing decline	Going for growth
Ecclesiological perspective: *the governance and purpose of the Church*	Mission of the CofE	Serving the common good	Making new disciples
	Principles underpinning CofE governance	Theological convictions	Evidence-based logic
Decision-making prerogative: *preferred locus of authority*	Balance between human and divine decision rights	Respecting that God is in control	People can help God
	Balance between central and local decision rights	Local churches are autonomous	Central church directs and steers

3.3.3 Examining the development of views on entrepreneurial initiatives

Existing literature shows that an organization's entrepreneurial orientation can change over time (Boling et al., 2016; Grühn et al., 2017). To identify shifts in the way entrepreneurial ideas were regarded within the CofE, I followed prior historical case studies (Augustine & Piazza, 2022; Boutinot & Delacour, 2022) and constructed a timeline that included the main changes that occurred during the period of study. I identified four distinct phases, which differed in terms of the type and number of entrepreneurial initiatives launched as well as the ideas that prevailed[3] (Table 5 in Appendix 1 summarizes these differences).

3.3.4 Uncovering the mechanisms driving change

The transitions shown in Table 5 (Appendix 1) were not uncontroversial; as Hehenberger et al. (2019) show, changes to the ideas and principles upon which organizations are based are likely to lead to conflict. Following these authors' approach to exploring why certain ideas gain dominance despite being contested, I identified all instances of report authors or Synod members arguing why certain ideas were superior or, conversely, inferior to others. I grouped similar arguments together. Table 6 (Appendix 1) shows the two main argument clusters I found. The first covers all instances of someone labeling an entrepreneurial proposal overly restrictive (narrow) or unnecessarily ambiguous (broad). I named this cluster "polysemy dynamics" because the Church's understanding of entrepreneurship repeatedly narrowed and broadened. The second cluster contains four variations of CofE members supporting the case for entrepreneurial change by leveraging prior debates, for instance, by referring to a consensus reached previously or addressing critique expressed in the past. Such use of past debates suggests that ideas do not disappear once they have been discussed but settle as material that can be used in future debates. I therefore refer to this cluster as "idea sedimentation."

4 Findings

My analysis reveals how ideas about entrepreneurship within the CofE have changed over time. The *change imperative* became more widely shared; the decline was not only acknowledged but even made way for discussions about growth. The *ecclesiological perspective* shifted as well, in that making new disciples became an important part of the CofE's mission and its governance became increasingly evidence-based. The *decision-making prerogative* gradually moved from God and local churches to the central church. These ideas manifested themselves in debates sparked when *entrepreneurial initiatives* were proposed. I will now elaborate on these changes. Thereafter, I will discuss the two mechanisms – polysemy dynamics and idea sedimentation – that drove the process of EO development.

[3] These were mostly changes in emphasis; none of the perspectives disappeared completely, but some of them moved to the background while others gained prominence.

4.1 First phase (1980–1991)

The main entrepreneurial initiative announced by the CofE in the 1980s was The Decade of Evangelism: an open-ended call to action, asking parishes to commit to evangelism "in their own way and at their own pace" (GS884, 1989: 1). The central church did not take any action beyond making that call (Pike, 1990). Yet, The Decade was entrepreneurial by the CofE's standards. Evangelism was regarded as proactive – "Christians should not be passive (…) we should seek to bring our Gospel insights upon [our culture]" (GS proceedings 1991: 599) – as well as innovative and risky (see Appendix 1, Table 3). Verbally endorsing it, therefore, constitutes a form of EO rhetoric (cf. Watson et al., 2019).

It took the CofE almost the entire first phase to agree on using EO rhetoric. This was in part due to conflicting ideas about the *change imperative*. While some reports mentioned "a decline in numbers" (GS514, 1981: 34) as a motivation for evangelistic change, others downplayed the decline, for instance, by highlighting "the opportunities for the Church" created by a "hunger for spiritual experience" (GS780A, 1987: 29) among young people. The CofE's adoption of EO rhetoric was also delayed by *ecclesiological* critiques. Opponents of The Decade perceived evangelism as "a rather disturbing and impolite business" (Reid, 1991) and feared that focusing on it would compromise the Church's social mission: "for those who (…) desire to call every possible person to repentance and faith, (…) works of social amelioration can seem a distraction" (GS780A, 1987: 53).

Eventually, *ecclesiological* concerns were addressed. Evangelism and social amelioration were no longer understood as binary opposites: "Evangelism and concern for social justice go hand in hand" (GS proceedings 1987: 668). This position was reached after GS members reminded the central church of its track record of failing to act on *change imperatives*. One member shared an anecdote about their diocese's response to a report in which the CofE's international partners urged the Church to change: "[people] said: (…) 'We have heard it all before'. That's the point. We may have heard it all before, but have we listened to it?" (GS proceedings 1982a: 71). Such experiences were used to stress that the binary "either/or concept of mission" (GS proceedings 1980: 808) should be abandoned to prevent new, change-delaying "civil warfare to break out in the Church" (GS proceedings 1991: 612).

During this first phase, Synod members also proposed changing the CofE's organizational configuration: "The parish system (…) in my view [is] ripe for change" (GS proceedings 1982a: 66). Such proposals were not accepted. *Ecclesiologically*, the parish structure was "sacrosanct" (GS proceedings 1982b: 959) because it represented the CofE's "concern for all without exception" (GS proceedings 1989: 640). The central church changing parish boundaries was also seen as an infringement on local churches' *decision-making prerogative*: "The fundamental importance of the local congregation remains the key to any decade" (Ibid.: 623). Yet, as the following sections will illustrate, this proposal was only buried temporarily and would eventually resurface.

4.2 Second phase (1992–2003)

In the second phase, the main manifestation of EO within the CofE was church planting. Church planting can be seen as a new entry initiative (cf. Kindermann et al., 2023) because it involves establishing new congregations. It was seen as innovative, proactive (see Appendix 1, Table 3) and risky; church planters needed "courage to take chances, to overcome inertia and the inevitable opposition (GS proceedings 1994: 240). Once "one or two parishes started church planting," the central church began "to see that possibly here is a method for everybody" (GS Misc 456, 1995: 22) and started providing guidance through reports like "Breaking New Ground" (GS1099, 1994).

In focusing on church planting, the CofE adopted a much narrower understanding of entrepreneurship than it did during the Decade of Evangelism. In fact, the open-endedness of The Decade was one of the reasons for narrowing it down. During The Decade, evangelism was described "as all things to all men" (Longley, 1992). This created "an overwhelming perplexity as to how to set about it" (GS Misc 392, 1992: 22). Therefore, not much actual evangelism took place: "We have not had a decade of evangelism. We have had a decade of preparing for evangelism" (GS proceedings 1999: 141). Disappointment about this lack of commitment triggered reminders of the *change imperative*: "We expect action: action to put

evangelism at the top of every agenda" (GS proceedings 1996: 210).

In addition to the open-endedness of the Decade of Evangelism, previous *ecclesiological* debates – specifically the newly established consensus that "evangelism and social action (…) are both sides of the same coin" (GS proceedings 1999: 144) – contributed to the decision to promote church planting. Church planting could now be presented as more than "simply (…) a method of evangelism" (GS proceedings 1994: 232); it ought to be seen as "a strategy for mission" (Ibid.) because "authentic evangelism is related to the whole scope of God's mission to the world" (GS proceedings 1999: 148).

Like in the first phase, there were calls for changing the CofE's organizational configuration. GS members, for instance, wondered whether "our inherited parochial system allow[s] for creative mission strategies" (GS proceedings 1994: 231). Such changes, however, continued to be controversial. *Ecclesiologically*, adapting the parish system contradicted "tacit Anglican assumptions about parochial boundaries" (GS1099, 1994: 29). Central church involvement would also have violated local churches' *decision-making prerogative*: "The higher the degree of local autonomy and the lower the level of central control, the larger the number of plants" (GS proceedings 1994: 241).

4.3 Third phase (2004–2012)

In the mid-2000s, Synod approved the "Bishops' Mission Order" (BMO). BMOs removed the "right of a minister to exclude further Anglican churches" (GS1523, 2004: 142). Bishops, "for the protection of new churches" (interviewee #3), could now overrule vicars who were opposed to new forms of church in their parish. As BMOs thus impacted the parish structure, they are an example of a change to the CofE's organizational configuration (cf. Wales et al., 2020). This was seen as risky, as it could theoretically allow bishops to approve "women celebrating communion (…) in a parish where the parish church does not accept women priests" (Hollingshurst, 2008 – see Table 3 in Appendix 1 for more evidence).

The introduction of BMOs was enabled by the central church dismissing the term "church planting." It was "no longer adequate" (GS1523, 2004: xi) and replaced by the more encompassing "Fresh Expressions." The latter not only included church plants but also captured existing parishes' "attempts to make a transition into a more missionary form of church" (Ibid.: xii) – even seemingly unentrepreneurial attempts: "We all know of the parent-and-toddler group that has been rebranded a Fresh Expression" (Cottrell, 2010). Broadening the definition of evangelism helped ease concerns about violations of local churches' *decision-making prerogative*. Evangelists could now argue that BMOs were "not about (…) overriding or undermining a parish" (Church Times, 2007) but enabled a "mixed economy": "the flourishing of Fresh Expressions alongside and within traditional parishes" (GS1648, 2007: 1).

The reports introducing BMOs also responded to earlier *ecclesiological* critiques by claiming that new, non-parish churches were as Anglican as the parish system: "It was never the case that all priests were parish priests" (GS Misc 810, 2006: 53). They also pointed out that Fresh Expressions, albeit in a different way, contributed to realizing the CofE's social mission: "These expressions of church (…) interpret their 'cure of souls' in terms of their current members plus [their] existing and potential contacts" (GS1523, 2004: 65).

While BMOs, after an "increasing number of calls for review of the diocesan structures in the Church of England" (GS1528, 2004: 6) were approved, the CofE's funding systems remained unchanged despite requests for using "some of the historic resources to fund *fresh* forms of being Church" (GS1529, 2004: 5, emphasis added) and introducing "a system of accountability" (GS proceedings 2004b: 199). These proposals contradicted dominant ideas about God's authority – "Only God can make his church grow (GS1835A, 2011: 2)" – as well as the *decision-making prerogative* of local churches; centrally funded initiatives could end up "destabilizing effective existing local initiatives" (GS proceedings 2004b: 201).

4.4 Fourth phase (2013–2019)

While, for most of its history, the CofE "deliberately did not disturb (…) ways of distributing national funding to dioceses" (GS1978, 2015: 2), in 2015, it launched an initiative called "Renewal and Reform" to change this part of its organizational configuration (cf. Wales et al., 2020). "Renewal and Reform" allowed the central church to dip "into its £6.1 billion

endowment (…) to help pay for an aggressive new expansion strategy" (Bingham, 2015). Although local churches were officially still allowed to discover "a way of doing evangelism that works for us" (GS proceedings 2017: 158), the Church's "pro-active investment in new growth opportunities" (GS1978: 1)[4] suggests that its understanding of evangelism had narrowed and now primarily focused on initiatives with growth potential.

Making financial commitments to growth triggered *ecclesiological* questions about the demographics Fresh Expressions seemed to attract: "Evangelical churches (…) look very white, very middle class, very young. What does that say if you're black, poor or an immigrant?" (interviewee #8). Furthermore, Renewal and Reform's emphasis on targets and accountability was seen as "sorcery with statistics" (Sherwood, 2016) associated with "an overly secular management style approach" (GS Proceedings 2016: 146). These concerns were countered by referring to prior *ecclesiological* debates. "Renewal and Reform" would only fund evangelistic initiatives that kept "together spiritual and numerical growth" (GS1978, 2015: 2) and involved social action through "a strong bias to the poor" (GS proceedings 2015: 126). In other words, Renewal and Reform's "managerial" policies were "not the final aim of the Church" (GS proceedings 2015: 19); they were only a means to support "mission in the poorest communities" (GS1978, 2015: 5).

"Renewal and Reform" was also justified by reminding stakeholders that "in the past, (…) there may have been greater levels of confidence (…) that growth could be achieved without fundamental change" (Handley, 2015). Such inaction could be ended by "treating [Fresh Expressions] as mainstream rather than novel or marginal activities" (GS1895, 2013: 4). Hence, by setting up various task forces and working groups, the archbishops increased the pressure to act on the *change imperative*: "The Task Group is committed to provoking, stimulating and enabling every local church to renew their commitment to evangelism" (GS2015, 2016: 10).

[4] See Table 3 in Appendix 1 for further evidence of how "Renewal and Reform" aligns with the dimensions underlying EO.

4.5 Mechanisms driving EO development

Thus far, I have discussed how the CofE's entrepreneurial orientation changed. Early, somewhat cautious initiatives primarily revolved around EO rhetoric (the Decade of Evangelism). These were later supplemented by new entry initiatives (church planting, Fresh Expressions). Toward the end of the period of study, the Church also adapted its organizational configuration (through BMOs and "Renewal and Reform"). Each of these manifestations of EO was considered risky, innovative, and proactive (see Table 3, Appendix 1). In fact, most of them were initially regarded as too entrepreneurial. Hence, the CofE's understanding of what it means to innovate, take risks, and be proactive – the core dimensions of EO (Lumpkin & Dess, 1996) – changed along with the entrepreneurial initiatives it launched. My analysis of the arguments provided in favor of and against entrepreneurship suggests that polysemy dynamics and idea sedimentation played a critical role in these developments.

4.5.1 Polysemy dynamics

Polysemy refers to "concepts, words, artifacts, or images that support multiple meanings" (Gümüsay et al., 2020: 144). My findings show that polysemy levels can fluctuate over time. The way "evangelism" was operationalized within the CofE was particularly variable. In the first phase, when the Decade of Evangelism was announced, it was unclear what the central church expected local churches to do. This resulted in drastically different interpretations, with some parishes focusing on prayer and others starting new forms of church. The report "Breaking New Ground," published during the second phase, promoted a much narrower understanding of evangelism by equating it with church planting. The term "church planting" was replaced by "Fresh Expressions" in the third phase. Because the latter included new forms of church other than plants, it increased local churches' freedom to decide which evangelistic initiatives to launch. Yet, this did not constitute a return to the breadth of the first phase; Fresh Expressions were supposed to involve changing the style of worship, so prayer alone would no longer be sufficient. During the fourth phase, the central church primarily funded Fresh Expressions with growth potential. This suggests that the CofE's understanding of evangelism

narrowed once again in that growth now seemed to be an important element.

The broadening and narrowing of the meaning assigned to concepts like "evangelism" had a dual impact on EO development in the CofE. First, it delayed the process. Change was contested whenever the central church was believed to be imposing an overly narrow understanding of evangelism on local churches. For instance, when the central church operationalized evangelism as church planting, proposals to change the parish system through BMOs were resisted. BMOs were only approved once evangelism was defined more broadly as "starting a Fresh Expression." Second, and despite the delays they caused, polysemy dynamics kept EO development going. Whereas narrow definitions were regarded as overly prescriptive, broad understandings of evangelism were criticized for being too ambiguous. For example, entrepreneurial local churches complained that the (highly open-ended) Decade of Evangelism did not provide the guidance they needed. Narrowing the definition of evangelism in response to such critique, e.g., explaining that church planting was a legitimate form of evangelism, sparked action.

Because both meaning narrowing and meaning broadening triggered debate, the CofE only implemented one change initiative at a time. Polysemy dynamics, therefore, contributed to setting a pace of change that fitted the CofE – an organization in which, throughout history, "every major change proposed has been refused" (GS Misc 456, 1995: 18, emphasis in original). In other words, broadening or narrowing the meanings associated with key terms seems to have been appropriate for "an English Church moulded by history and culture to be like the English: in favour of slow evolutionary change" (GS1523, 2004: 131–132). Yet, the process was not just slow; it was "incremental *and* sustained" (GS Misc 1054, 2012: 7, emphasis added), in that it always continued, to the extent that evangelism was regarded as a movement of a "threatening and predatory nature" (GS proceedings 2004a: 140).

4.5.2 Idea sedimentation

Throughout the period of study, authors of reports as well as GS members referred to ideas discussed previously to support their arguments. In the first phase, proponents of the Decade of Evangelism reminded the Synod that previous debates about evangelism never actually led to any evangelistic action, claiming that this time, the Church should act on the *change imperative*. Church planting was promoted during the second phase by leveraging the *ecclesiological* consensus Synod established the first phase, i.e., by stressing that evangelistic initiatives like church plants contribute to the Church's social mission. In the third phase, the CofE published reports explaining why BMOs were *ecclesiologically* sound, thereby addressing earlier critiques from GS members opposed to changing the parish system. Finally, the central church used evidence of the success of Fresh Expressions, an initiative Synod previously agreed to promote, to change the *decision-making prerogative*, i.e., assign itself the authority to reallocate Church funds (see Table 6, Appendix 1 for illustrations).

Hence, debates held, arguments advanced, or commitments made during any phase of the EO development process did not only impact that particular phase but also frequently spilled over into the next. In other words, entrepreneurial proposals discussed in General Synod settled as idea sediment: residue left behind by an ongoing stream of debate and meetings. Idea sediment served as a resource for advocates of entrepreneurial change, who used it to form arguments in support of their proposals. Interestingly, it did not seem to matter whether the sediment was made up of ideas that had previously been rejected or accepted. On the one hand, evangelists reminded Synod of the proposals it accepted in the past, warning them not to fall "into the danger that we always seem to do, of acknowledging that change (…) needs to take place, but hoping that it will not make any difference to us at all" (GS proceedings 2004b: 208). On the other hand, they convinced their colleagues that the reasons for which they rejected initiatives in the past no longer applied.

Idea sedimentation, through providing material that could be used to support entrepreneurial proposals, positively impacted the process of EO development within the CofE in two ways. First, it provided advocates of entrepreneurial change with the chance to respond to *ecclesiological* critique or concerns about the *decision-making prerogative*. The

"Resourcing Mission Group," for instance, reinterpreted past criticism of its proposals as an opportunity to reflect on its own arguments: "…reaction to the [last] document was mixed (…) [yet, it] raised some important questions (…) further work should be undertaken to address them" (GS Misc 810, 2006: 1). Second, idea sedimentation increased the amount of material available for advocating entrepreneurial change. As time progressed and more debates had been held, the amount of supportive idea sediment grew. This helped make a more compelling case for further evangelistic action. BMO legislation, for example, was introduced because it "derived from (…) *Mission-shaped Church*, which the Synod debated in 2004" (Church Times, 2007).

5 Discussion

5.1 Contributions

This study makes two contributions to research on the connections between religion and entrepreneurship. First, I shed new light on this relationship. Previous research primarily discusses the macro-level and individual-level effects of religion on entrepreneurship (Rietveld & Hoogendoorn, 2022). Organization-level studies, while comparatively scarce, also conclude that religion shapes entrepreneurship (Eze et al., 2021; Sabah et al., 2014). The relationship between religion and entrepreneurship is thus portrayed as *linear* and religion is treated as the driving force. My analysis of a forty-year-long debate about evangelism in the Church of England indeed indicates that religious principles shaped the nature of the entrepreneurial initiatives the CofE launched. Yet, those initiatives, in turn, triggered a reinterpretation of ecclesiological beliefs about the mission of the Church and the principles underpinning its governance (see Table 4 in Appendix 1). Hence, my findings show that entrepreneurship and religion can have a *recursive* relationship.

My second contribution to the literature on entrepreneurship and religion is providing more detailed insight into how the two are combined. Prior studies suggest that the combination works because entrepreneurship can serve as a vehicle for honoring God, creating a working environment in which religious beliefs can be incorporated, or sharing religion with others (Griebel et al., 2014; Neubert et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2019). This line of work, therefore, largely focuses on situations where there are no tensions between entrepreneurial and religious values. Gümüsay et al.'s (2020) study of an Islamic bank is a rare exception; these authors found that entrepreneurs resolved tensions through polysemy, i.e., by deliberately using words that enable multiple interpretations. I nuance their findings by showing that polysemy does not always resolve tensions. Within the CofE, combining entrepreneurship and religion required polysemy *dynamics*, i.e., successive waves of meaning broadening and narrowing because ambiguous terminology alone frustrated people who needed entrepreneurial guidance. In addition, I identified a second novel mechanism: idea sedimentation. As time passed, the number of ways of combining entrepreneurship and religion debated by the CofE's General Synod increased. Advocates of entrepreneurial change leveraged those debates to strengthen their case; they encouraged their colleagues to act on prior consensus or improved the arguments underpinning previously rejected proposals. Hence, idea sedimentation made combining entrepreneurship and religion easier.

This study also contributes to research on entrepreneurial orientation. My analysis of debates about entrepreneurial initiatives in the Church of England was informed by this literature and confirms some of its recent insights (see Tables 3 and 5 in Appendix 1). Like in other nonprofit organizations, entrepreneurship within the CofE was more socially oriented than it would typically be in for-profit businesses (Morris et al., 2011). EO manifested itself as rhetoric, as new entry initiatives, and as changes to the Church's organizational configuration (cf. Kindermann et al., 2023). Finally, the CofE's understanding of EO's core dimensions shifted over time (per Wales, 2016). Existing EO research, however, does not explain how and why those changes occur (Miller, 2011; Randerson, 2016). By outlining how the CofE's EO developed, I take a first step in that direction. Specifically, I show that the CofE went through four lengthy phases, during which levels of entrepreneurial activity fluctuated, and even EO rhetoric

– the least substantive manifestation of EO (Wang et al., 2021) – was contested. This suggests that EO does not instantly emerge in a religious setting, even when the right conditions, e.g., a hostile environment, are in place. I also introduce two mechanisms (polysemy dynamics and idea sedimentation) that can fuel EO development.

5.2 Limitations and future research

Although this paper sheds light on an underexplored phenomenon, it has some limitations that future research can address. For example, while my case study provides rich insights into the process of EO development within the CofE, certain original details are bound to remain invisible in historical data (Hargadon & Douglas, 2001). In my case, it was difficult to retrieve what motivated people to support or resist a new initiative. I was also unable to see whether decisions made by the General Synod pervaded across the organizational hierarchy (see Wales et al., 2011), i.e., were adopted by local churches, or were, in fact, even made outside of GS meetings. An ethnographic study that tracks how entrepreneurial initiatives are discussed across hierarchy levels in religious organizations could capture these details.

Another limitation of this study relates to the research setting. Selecting the Church of England as the focus of my analysis allowed me to trace how a religious organization became increasingly entrepreneurially oriented. However, since CofE membership continuously declined during my period of study, it is unclear whether the two mechanisms – polysemy dynamics and idea sedimentation – that drive EO development ultimately help religious organizations realize the benefits normally associated with EO. Arguably, they may have only been this prominent *because of* the ongoing decline.[5] Future research could examine the interconnections between performance and these mechanisms. It may also be worthwhile exploring to what extent polysemy dynamics and idea sedimentation play a role in the EO development processes that unfold in non-religious organizations, where the idea of entrepreneurship may be less controversial.

[5] I would like to thank an anonymous review for making this suggestion.

6 Appendix 1

Table 2 Data sources by type

Data source	Data type	Data description	Role of data
Documents discussed in General Synod meetings and the proceedings, i.e., minutes, of those meetings	Primary archival	This archival material (47 documents and the proceedings of 29 meetings) presents points of view from proponents and opponents of entrepreneurial ideas	These data served to compile a historical narrative of EO development in the CofE by identifying the ideas and justifications presented to and put forward by the General Synod
Articles reporting on the primary archival material in UK national newspapers (retrieved via Nexis UK) and the Church Times (an independent Anglican weekly newspaper)	Media	These data include 80 Church Times articles and 87 articles from secular UK newspapers. They make explicit references to the documents included in the primary archival data	Media data served to triangulate the archival data. It presented viewpoints and examples that confirmed or challenged the emerging historical narrative
Semi-structured interviews with church planters and experts of the Church of England's history	Interviews	Nine semi-structured interviews with church planters and two interviews with experts, averaging 75 min each	Interviews served to gain a first-hand point of view from people who were or are involved in entrepreneurial initiatives within the CofE

Table 3 Entrepreneurially oriented initiatives in the Church of England

	Dimension of entrepreneurial orientation (as defined by Lumpkin & Dess, 1996)		
Main examples of each of the three manifestations of an entrepreneurial orientation (see Wales et al., 2020)	Risk taking: "*preferences for bold versus cautious acts to achieve (…) objectives*" (p. 146)	Innovativeness: "*tendency to engage in and support new ideas, novelty, experimentation, and creative processes*" (p. 142)	Proactiveness: "*a forward-looking perspective that is accompanied by innovative or new-venturing activity*" (p. 146)
Example of entrepreneurial top management style, i.e., EO rhetoric: announcing the Decade of Evangelism: "…make the closing years of this millennium a 'Decade of Evangelism' with a renewed and united emphasis on making Christ known to the people of his world" (GS884, 1989: 1)	"…to commit ourselves to evangelism is a very high-risk strategy for the Church" (GS proceedings, 1989: 624)	"…enhance an evangelism (…) that releases an active and *imaginative* use of proclamation" (GS514, 1981: 29, emphasis added)	"…there are many situations where it is right and proper for Christians to *take the initiative* (…) in making known the good news of Jesus Christ" (GS780A, 1987: 38, emphasis added)
Example of entrepreneurial new entry initiatives: church plants and fresh expressions: "We understand 'church planting' to refer to the discipline of creating new communities of Christian faith (…) 'Fresh expressions (…) also give evidence of [existing] parishes' attempts to make a transition into a more missionary form of church" (GS1523, 2004: xii)	"In undertaking [church plants] we need (…) courage to take chances, to overcome inertia and the inevitable opposition" (GS proceedings 1994: 240)	"…new congregations may be planted in *unconsecrated* buildings (…) and they may be led by a member of the clergy or be *entirely lay led*" (GS1099, 1994: 11, emphasis added to highlight the new venues and forms of leadership being considered)	"…there will need to be new forms of Christian mission communities ('fresh expressions') that are relevant to people today. This means (…) churches have to be proactive in reaching out into their local areas" (GS Misc 854, 2007: 98)
Examples of entrepreneurial organizational configuration: changing parish structure and funding allocation: Bishops' Mission Orders were created to allow bishops to "affirm, enable, encourage and support a new (…) initiative" (GS1684, 2008: 1), even when it cuts "across a number of different parishes" (Ibid.: 3). Renewal and Reform mandated that the central church reserved "all of the funding distributed to dioceses (…) for mission and growth" (GS1978, 2015: 1)	Structure: BMO "legislation is not afraid to tackle the issue of recognising church plants across parish boundaries" (Hollingshurst, 2008) Funding: "High risk and long-term projects can receive funds if the potential benefit can be shown to be worth the risk" (GS1978, 2015: 14)	Structure: "it was in recognition of the limitations of existing arrangements, particularly in providing space for experiment (…), that the new arrangements for Bishops' Mission Orders were developed" (GS1684, 2008: 1) Funding: "The [old] formula should be replaced by *a new means* of calculating dioceses' allocation of funds" (GS1978, 2015: 7, emphasis added)	Structure: "The development of the Bishops' Mission Order will be a very helpful tool for dioceses in (…) encouraging new communities" (GS1648, 2007: 5) Funding: "The question is not 'how do we limit expenditure to address our steadily diminishing resources?' (…) The issue is 'what investment must we make to achieve the ambition of growth?'" (GS1978, 2015: 1)

Table 4 Data exemplars for the ideas in opposition within the Church of England

Idea content		Perspective 1	Perspective 2
Change imperative: *Perceived need for the CofE to become entrepreneurial*	Interpretation of declining attendance	*Downplaying decline*: "Surveys have shown that very large numbers of people still believe (…) but that very few belong to a church (…). This crisis in belonging is not restricted to church but extends over the whole of society" (GS proceedings 1997: 186)	*Acknowledging decline*: "We have to face up to the implications of the relentless decline in the Church's membership. The statistics are familiar (…) church electoral roll in 1930 = 3.7 million; down to 1.4 million in 2001" (GS1529, 2004: 16)
	Necessity of responding to decline	*No urgency in reversing decline*: "In the Liverpool diocese, we are saying that there is no hurry to plunge into new evangelistic initiatives; rather, there is a prior need to spend good time in sustained prayer and preparation" (Sheppard, 1991)	*Going for growth*: "The growth of the Church is or should be the concern of all Christian people, and the church grows by evangelism" (GS2015, 2016: 5)
Ecclesiological perspective: *The governance and purpose of the Church*	Mission of the CofE	*Serving the common good*: "It was very significant to that community that at a time of mass exodus by so many of the people who were helping them, we were able to stay. The church was important because of the practical things we were doing, like housing the food bank and supporting volunteer-run community projects" (GS proceedings 2016: 148)	*Making new disciples*: "The Decade of Evangelism has (…) [made] evangelism itself central to the life of the living Church. After all, the Great Commission of our Lord was to 'go and teach all nations whatsoever I have commanded you'" (GS proceedings 1996: 203)
	Principles underpinning CofE governance	*Theological convictions*: "The Church's relationship to the parish expresses a theology of the Kingdom. God's love extends not just to the Christian community gathered for worship but to all who live within the parish boundary" (GS proceedings 2004a: 146)	*Evidence-based considerations*: "In relation to all the funding they receive, dioceses should report to each other their strategic plans for the money and, at the end of every triennium, report on the outcome of its use" (GS Misc 810, 2006: 46)

Table 4 (continued)

Idea content		Perspective 1	Perspective 2
Decision-making prerogative: *Preferred locus of authority*	Balance between human and divine decision rights	*Respecting that God is in control*: "It is easy to think that if we have the best preachers and the best publicity and the best visual aids and so on, then people will come, people will hear, and people will be changed; but unless we have the best prayers (…) we cannot expect to succeed. Mission is not ours, it is God's" (GS proceedings 1987: 674)	*People can help God*: "The results of any evangelistic activity rest with the Triune God; but it is (…) those programmes and those workers which have an explicit focus on evangelism which are most fruitful in terms of making new disciples" (Strategic Investment Board, 2019: 22)
	Balance between central and local decision rights	*Local churches are autonomous*: "Many of the initiatives in the Church over the past 25 years have originated (…) from ground level (…) This should not dismay us but rather encourage us, especially those of us who believe in bottom-up rather than top-down leadership" (GS proceedings 2004a: 145)	*Central church directs and steers*: "We jealously protect the sovereignty (…) of the local church just a bit too much. There are factors in our evangelistic ineffectiveness that (…) cannot be tackled by a diocese" (GS proceedings 1989: 625)

Table 5 Timeline of the EO development process within the Church of England

	First phase (1980–1991)	Second phase (1992–2003)	Third phase (2004–2012)	Fourth phase (2013–2019)
Change imperative	Decline downplayed and not responded to	Decline acknowledged, no urgency to reverse it	Decline acknowledged and reacted to with urgency	Decline acknowledged, focus on achieving growth
Ecclesiological perspective	Church serves common good; governed by theological convictions	Church serves common good; governed by theological convictions	Church prioritizes making new disciples; governed by theological convictions	Church serves common good by making new disciples; governed by evidence-based logic
Decision-making prerogative	Decision rights with God and local churches	People can help God; local churches are autonomous	People can help God; local churches are autonomous	People can help God; central church directs and steers
Entrepreneurial initiative	Decade of Evangelism announced (EO rhetoric)	Church planting promoted (new entry initiative)	Fresh expressions promoted (new entry initiative); BMOs introduced (org. configuration)	Resources shifted to new entry initiatives (org. configuration)

Table 6 Mechanisms driving EO development within the Church of England

Mechanism	Manifestation	Illustrative quote
Polysemy dynamics: *Consecutive waves of broadening and narrowing the meaning of key terms*	Pointing out the downsides of using ambiguous terms and/or replacing them by more precise vocabulary (*narrowing*)	"We have had a succession of useful documents since 1974, and each has produced only a mediocre response and debate in this General Synod. Maybe it is partly because of the breadth of the subject; (…) if everything is mission, nothing is mission, and it becomes impossible to handle" (GS proceedings 1987: 675)
	Pointing out the downsides of using precise vocabulary and/or replacing it by more ambiguous terms (*broadening*)	"I have to say that the thought that *a mission-shaped Church should be* 'going to church with other people who are like us' seems a pretty dismal prospect to me. How sad! I go to church to be with people who are very different, and I hope that we can keep that perspective" (GS proceedings 2004a: 140, emphasis added to highlight that the speaker is about to give a definition)
Idea sedimentation: *Referring to ideas discussed previously in support of a new argument*	Highlighting *change imperative* by referring to lack of commitment to previously approved ideas	"I entirely support everything that has been said about the urgency of the situation. (…) I have told members that (…) we have not been given the necessary resources by the Synod, which has a history of commending things but not paying for them" (GS proceedings 1996: 215)
	Justifying new ideas by referring to prior *ecclesiological* consensus	"…the problem of whether we encounter God at work in the world already or whether we go with him and do His mission in the world, will not resurface as a major issue. (…) [The report] *The Measure of Mission* helped us get round it by seeing that it was a 'both…and…'" (GS proceedings 1991: 612)
	Responding to past *ecclesiological* critique when reintroducing ideas	"There has been a vigorous theological debate since 2004. Mission-Shaped Church was criticised (…) for its somewhat narrow view of mission and the Kingdom of God. (…) Those debates were answered, in part, in the excellent 2012 Report, Fresh Expressions and the Mission of the Church" (GS proceedings 2019: 324)
	Supporting shift in *decision-making prerogative* by referring to performance of previously approved ideas	"People are coming to faith; new communities are forming (…). As I'm sure you know, however, this is only a beginning. If Fresh Expressions are needed anywhere because our culture is changing, they are needed everywhere. (…) Central mission funding, I believe, is vital to strengthen and encourage and sustain this new activity. It is the church putting serious resources behind its rhetoric" (GS proceedings 2007: 192–193)

7 Appendix 2: Bibliography of archival material

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