

THE IMPACT OF AUTISTIC COGNITIVE DISTINCTIVES
ON CONCEPTION OF GOD AND INTERPRETATION OF THE
SACRED TEXTS OF THE WESTERN CHRISTIAN
TRADITION: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COGNITIVE
ENGAGEMENT OF HIGH-FUNCTIONING AUTISTIC ADULTS
WITHIN THE CHURCH

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DECLARATION

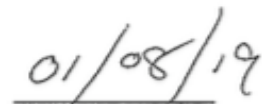
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ABSTRACT

In a previous literature review I suggested that autistic cognitive distinctives may give rise to differences in the understanding of the Christian tradition, with implications for the church. In this dissertation I explore those implications. Through a scoping survey of academic and practical-help literature, I conclude that there is little help available to churches in how to support the *cognitive engagement* of adult autistic worshippers who are without learning difficulties.

Using my personal experience as such an ‘autistic worshipper’, I outline the challenges of autistic *cognitive engagement* with the church through engagement with the scriptures and other sacred texts used in the western Christian tradition. I explain how these texts may impact autistic and non-autistic worshippers differently. Through this analysis I generate a hypothesis suggesting that differences in interpretation and understanding arising from autistic cognition are valid faith options which require church support if they are to develop and flourish.

By conducting a qualitative study of nine high-functioning adult autistic worshippers I explore ways in which their cognitive engagement with their churches differs from that of the rest of their congregations. I discuss my findings on this and on their mitigation of risks to their *cognitive engagement* with their churches, concluding that there is indicative evidence of support for my hypothesis.

Finally, I use a structured data analysis approach, together with suggestions made by study participants, to formulate ‘outline requirements’ for a potential *Engagement Model* for churches. These recommendations include proposals for

deepening the church's understanding of autism and ways of providing help with Biblical interpretation and application, together with support for 'talking through' concerns arising within an autistic context. I also offer suggestions for further research.

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TERMINOLOGY AND LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Terminology relating to Autistic People

Before I move into the study it is important to establish the language that I propose to use. I will work on the basis of autism as a ‘way of being’ (rather than a (moral/medical) ‘condition’), and so I will refer to ‘autistic people’.¹ Additionally, there is the question of expressions such as ‘normal’. Here, in an attempt to be neutral but clear, I will use the term ‘distinctive’ when discussing autistic characteristics and will assume autism to be a neurological (rather than behavioural) distinctive – consequently identifying non-autistic individuals as ‘neurotypical’.

Abbreviations

DSM	The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, published by the American Psychiatric Association. This includes the autism-related diagnostic criteria used particularly in the USA.
NAS	The National Autistic Society – a major UK autism charity.
NIV	The New International Version of the Bible. Unless stated otherwise all Biblical quotations used in this dissertation are from the NIV.

¹ A survey conducted by the NAS found this to be the preferred language of the autistic community.
<https://www.autism.org.uk/about/what-is/describing.aspx>

RD	Root Definition – a technique for analysing data in order to provide meaningful definitions of participant ‘viewpoints’.
SSM	Soft System Methodology – a problem-solving methodology developed by Peter Checkland for addressing unstructured, multi-viewpoint, problems. ²
ToM	Theory of Mind. The ability to ‘read’ the mind of another – seen by Prof. Simon Baron-Cohen and others as a key area of ‘deficit’ in autistic people. ³

² Peter Checkland, “Soft Systems Methodology” in *Rational Analysis for a Problematic World Revisited* (eds. Jonathan Rosenhead and John Mingers; Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2009, second edition, seventh reprint 2009), 61-90.

³ Simon Baron-Cohen, *Mindblindness: An Essay on Autism and the Theory of Mind* (Cambs., Mass.: MIT Press, 1995), 51-58.

1. INTRODUCTION

My recent “Review of Contemporary Literature on Autism and Spirituality” suggested the possibility that the distinctive cognitive processing associated with autism may generate a ‘different way of thinking’ about God and spiritual matters, whilst the neurological hypersensitivity experienced by some autistic people can result in unusual openness to direct (spiritual?) experiences.⁴ These possibilities give rise to areas of concern and investigation for Practical Theology, as they represent potential deviations from the typical experience of neurotypical worshippers with implications for church practice. A further area of concern (not covered in my review) is that of the challenge for autistic people in relating to the social side of the church. Monica Spoor comments that “Preparation for Sunday services begins long before the actual service ... when I try to determine how crowded or difficult a service is going to be”; she also described her sentiment at the end of the service as “[n]ow for the dreaded moment, the coffee hour”.⁵ The range of experience of autistic people is significant. For some, their challenges are clearly exhibited through their behaviour, whilst others may have more ‘hidden’ difficulties; indeed, as Gillian Carlisle observes, “Many adults with the condition do not appear to be disabled, and those who can cope with church attendance do so unobtrusively by working hard to adapt to the environment”.⁶

Taking these three areas of challenge, which I will refer to as *cognitive*, *sensory* and *social engagement*, I commence the present dissertation with a brief review of the

⁴ Stewart Rapley, “Review of Contemporary Literature on Autism and Spirituality” (Unpublished essay: available from enquiries@nazarene.ac.uk, 2018).

⁵ Monica Spoor, *Spirituality on the Spectrum: having autism in the Orthodox Church* (Brave New Books, 2017), 24-25.

⁶ Gillian Carlisle, “Beyond the Walls: A Reflection on the Theological Issues associated with an Autistic Child’s Experience at Buckfast Abbey”, *Journal of European Baptist Studies*, 16:4 (2016), 28.

available literature addressing practical aspects of engaging autistic people within the church. This review maps out the scope for further exploration rather than seeking to be comprehensive. I conclude that the area of *cognitive engagement* of adults without additional learning difficulties ('high-functioning') is not well covered. As such an 'autistic worshipper' myself, I have experienced challenges in this area. I have accordingly focused this study on the implications for the western church of accommodating the potential 'cognitive distinctives' of such autistic adults.

The question arises as to what these '*cognitive engagement* challenges' are and how they differ from the experience of neurotypical worshippers. Slavoj Žižek recounts a scene from the film *Ninotchka*.⁷ A man in a café orders "coffee without cream". The waiter responds that "we have run out of cream – we only have milk; can I bring you coffee without milk?". Žižek comments that "what you *don't get* is part of the identity of what you *do get*". Often, in conversation, what is 'not said' is as important as what 'is said'. We might consider two ways of 'thinking' – one (neurotypical) which takes what 'is there', but adds contextual inferences from 'what is not there' ('reading' body language, ironic/sarcastic intent etc.) in order to achieve coherence in meaning, and the other (autistic) which simply works with 'what is there' and is, suggests Peter Vermeulen, 'blind' to context.⁸

Vermeulen compares the functioning of the autistic mind to that of a computer.⁹ Both involve a systemic, rules-based, approach and operate purely on data that 'is there'. He illustrates using a scene from the film *Rain Man* in which Raymond Babbitt

⁷ This clip can be found on the web at url <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WHdAKfcNnA>

⁸ Peter Vermeulen, *Autism as Context Blindness* (Kansas: AAPC Publishing, 2012), 21.

⁹ Peter Vermeulen, *Autistic Thinking – This is the title* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2001), 11-19.

becomes stranded in the middle of a busy road junction, the sign having initially said 'WALK', but having changed to 'DON'T WALK' half-way across.¹⁰ The 'is there' information ('WALK', 'DON'T WALK') provides inadequate rules for coping with the entirety of such a situation, which would be handled instinctively-contextually by a neurotypical person.

With this key point of understanding in place, I come to the issue of our Western Christian tradition. As John Gillibrand observes, "Scripture, tradition, liturgy are taken as the foundational bases of the Church", with God often portrayed in primarily anthropomorphic terms as a 'relational' central character in the narrative.¹¹ I offer some examples from personal experience of how the different aspects of autistic cognition have impacted my reading of the Biblical text.

First, two examples that relate to systematised thinking and the anthropomorphic view of God. I have found it increasingly difficult to believe in an anthropomorphic, personal, intervening, God 'who' has a 'plan for my life' (Jeremiah 29:11 etc.) whilst appearing to have no such plan for significant numbers of humans who face nothing but disease and starvation. In the context of Biblical consistency, I have found it problematic to be faced in the Bible with logical difficulties such as, for example, a genealogy of Jesus in Luke 3 that is both inconsistent with Matthew's version whilst having been "carefully investigated" (Luke 1:3), and which connects the (presumably) mythical Adam to the (presumably) historical Jesus.

¹⁰ Vermeulen, *Autistic Thinking – This is the title*, 34.

¹¹ John Gillibrand, *Disabled Church – Disabled Society: The Implications of Autism for Philosophy, Theology and Politics* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2010), 188.

Consider second an example of ‘rules-based’ thinking such as Jesus’ statement in Luke 6:30 that we should “Give to everyone who asks you”. My personal experience suggests that such an approach, applied at face value, is likely to result in potentially disastrous outcomes for all concerned.

Third is the topic of indirect language in the Bible – for example the Psalms, much of the writing of the prophets and the teaching and parables of Jesus. Whilst it may be clear that the language is not ‘literal’, I can often be left puzzled over what is, in fact, being said. Take, for example, Psalm 137:9, which says “happy is he ... who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks”. Within what conception of God, I ask, is it appropriate to read this and declare, “This is the Word of the Lord”?

Of course, these challenges are not unique to autistic worshippers. What makes the difference is access to, or lack of, what is ‘not there’. Neurotypical worshippers typically have the option to respond to such challenges by instinctively factoring ‘relevant’ contextual inferences into their interpretation. Such an option is not so easy, or sometimes not even possible, for the autistic worshipper. This is not to say that autistic worshippers cannot learn ways of doing this to some degree.

These cognitive challenges raise questions of hermeneutics. N.T. Wright comments that “[a]ll Christian churches are officially signed up to strong statements about the centrality of scripture and its authority in their mission, life, doctrine and discipline. But there is no agreement on what this might mean, or how it might work out in practice”.¹² In his book *Finally Comes the Poet*, Walter Brueggemann claims that

¹² N.T. Wright, *Scripture and the Authority of God* (London: SPCK, 2005), xiii.

“The gospel is ... a truth widely held, but a truth greatly reduced. ... flattened, trivialized, and rendered inane ... [by] our technical way of thinking ...”.¹³ Whilst indirect language is the inevitable result of seeking to describe a mystery and so presents a challenge to everyone, the autistic worshipper has an additional ‘journey’ to make in seeking to access the text from the starting position that ‘it means what it says’.

John Shelby Spong argues that, “To read the gospels properly ... requires a knowledge of Jewish culture, Jewish symbols, Jewish icons and the tradition of Jewish storytelling ... of what the Jews call “midrash.” Only those people who are completely unaware of these things could ever have come to think that the gospels were meant to be read literally”.¹⁴ In addition to the requirement for more ‘contextual information’, Spong suggests that we are affected by a profound shift in worldview from the world of the biblical writers.¹⁵ My dilemma is neatly summarised by Spong’s assertion that, “I must either reject the Bible to live in a modern world or I must reject the modern world in order to cling to the Bible. This is a choice I cannot and will not make”.¹⁶

As an ‘autistic worshipper’ with these challenges I have little option but to adopt what Helen Cameron and Catherine Duce call an “overt role” in this investigation.¹⁷ My experience suggests that the interaction between ‘autistic cognition’ and the church’s texts raises the possibility that, rather than the challenge for the church being simply how to enable autistic worshippers to access/receive the ‘given’ tradition, the tradition

¹³ Walter Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 1.

¹⁴ John Shelby Spong, *Biblical Literalism: A Gentile Heresy* (New York: Harper Collins, 2016), 3.

¹⁵ Spong, *Biblical Literalism*, 7.

¹⁶ Spong, *Biblical Literalism*, 10.

¹⁷ Helen Cameron and Catherine Duce, *Researching Practice in Ministry and Mission: A Companion* (London: SCM Press, 2013. Second impression 2017), 51.

may, on occasions, be challenged and even modified by the autistic cognition. I therefore agree with Stephen Pattison, who advocates what Cameron and Duce call a “dialogue of equals in which the Christian tradition may be brought under question by lessons from practice as well as the other way around”.¹⁸

In order to explore such issues in more depth and to get some indicative sense of whether my assessment might constitute a more general, rather than simply personal, concern, I carried out a small qualitative survey. I interviewed nine high-functioning ‘autistic worshippers’ in order to explore their cognitive approach to thinking about God and engaging with the Bible and other ‘sacred texts’ (creeds, liturgies and hymns) together with their perception of whether and how this differed from the ‘understanding’ presented within their churches.

As an outcome from this study I look to move towards an *Engagement Model* for autistic adults in churches by setting out some outline requirements and criteria for the cognitive component of such a model. Finally, I offer some areas for further research.

¹⁸ Cameron and Duce, *Researching Practice in Ministry and Mission*, xxviii.

2. REFINING SCOPE: THE IMPACT OF AUTISTIC COGNITIVE DISTINCTIVES IN LITERATURE

Literature relating to the impact of autism on the church falls broadly into two types: 1) literature providing a conceptual framework and 2) literature providing practical support to churches.

2.1 Literature providing a Conceptual Framework

I was able to identify only five texts which address this area. The first is John Gillibrand's book *Disabled Church – Disabled Society*. As both church minister and father of Adam, who is (virtually) non-verbally autistic, Gillibrand describes his efforts to integrate Adam into church life. In a later chapter Gillibrand considers "The Transformation of the Church", arguing that the church should be an 'agent of change', but currently "is not like that".¹⁹ He offers some broad issues for further reflection, such as a "plea for the Church to take the best of modern thought", but his recommendations are too general to be anything more than a pointer for further investigation.²⁰ Deborah Beth Creamer rightly describes this chapter as "frustratingly brief and seemingly absent of the complexity of earlier sections".²¹

A second approach is outlined in the article "Being Present versus Having a Presence", in which Erik W. Carter, Elizabeth E. Biggs and Thomas L. Boehm focus primarily on children – addressing the impact of cognitive impairment on the *social* and

¹⁹ Gillibrand, *Disabled Church – Disabled Society*, 189.

²⁰ Gillibrand, *Disabled Church – Disabled Society*, 188.

²¹ Deborah Beth Creamer, "Book Review: *Disabled Church – Disabled Society*", *Modern Believing* 53 no. 2 (2012), 202.

sensory aspects of church engagement.²² The article describes a qualitative study of twenty-five parents of children with Intellectual Development Disorder (commonly autism). The authors conclude that, whilst the needs expressed were generally of an “ordinary” nature, the ‘otherness’ of the children required a level of “intentionality” and the prioritising of “relationships over programs” on the part of the church.²³

Third, I considered the article “Church Ministry and the Child with Autism”, in which Joyce Emmons Nuner and Tamara Stringer Love comment on the “limited research” undertaken in the area of helping churches in including “families with children with developmental disabilities, specifically autism.”²⁴ The authors summarise the main autistic areas requiring church attention and indicate some practical remedies. They advocate a structured approach to assessing, planning and tracking the spiritual development for such children through initial registration, the use of Fowler’s model for understanding stages of faith development and of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs to plan appropriate ways to help children.²⁵

John Swinton’s article “Reflections on Autistic Love: What Does Love Look Like?” is fourth and presents interesting perspectives on love, with implications for our understanding of some of the ‘basics’ of the Christian faith.²⁶ Swinton argues that autistic people often understand and express love in a distinctive way, quoting Christine

²² Erik W. Carter, Elizabeth E. Biggs and Thomas L. Boehm, “Being Present versus Having a Presence: Dimensions of Belonging for Young People with Disabilities and their Families”, *Christian Education Journal Series 3* Vol. 13 No.1 (2016), 127–146.

²³ Carter, Biggs & Boehm, “Being Present versus Having a Presence”, 141.

²⁴ Joyce Emmons Nuner and Tamara Stringer Love, “Church Ministry and the Child with Autism”, *Faith and Community Ministries* Vol.26 (2013), 97.

²⁵ Nuner and Love, “Church Ministry and the Child with Autism”, 104, 106, 107.

²⁶ John Swinton, “Reflections on Autistic Love: What Does Love Look Like?”, *Practical Theology* 5.3 (2011), 260-278.

Guth, who suggests that they value “dogged commitment, persistence through agonising struggles, willingness to give and take, enjoyment of companionship, and other treasured aspects of shared living”.²⁷ Swinton questions the frequent distinction made between faith and works. The autistic conception of love, he suggests, involves the working out of devotion (to others and to God) in the context of behaviours. Disappointingly, Swinton, having raised the question, does not develop the point.

Lastly, I have included *Pray Your Way* by Bruce Duncan. Whilst not exploring prayer specifically through ‘autistic eyes’, Duncan utilises the *Myers-Briggs* personality types to create a framework which, because of its structured, rational, nature, is likely to be helpful to autistic people.²⁸ Duncan argues that approaches to prayer can be understood along two axes: 1) How we approach/engage with God: linking the *cataphatic* and *apophatic* traditions – aligning with the Myers-Briggs ‘Perception’ preferences of ‘S’ and ‘N’ respectively, and 2) How we go about prayer: linking *speculative* and *affective* ways of prayer – which align with the Myers-Briggs “Judgement” preferences of ‘T’ and ‘F’ respectively.²⁹

I conclude that there is little academic literature addressing the practical issues of *cognitive engagement* for autistic people, particularly those without learning

²⁷ Swinton, “Reflections on Autistic Love: What Does Love Look Like?”, 267.

²⁸ Myers-Briggs adopts a Jungian model, describing people as being energised as a preference either by what is happening in their ‘inner’ (*Introverted – I*) or ‘external’ (*Extroverted – E*) world. It then analyses ‘obtaining information about the world’ as a *Perceiving* function (*P*), with preferences for *Sensing* (*S* – gathering data through the senses) or *iNtuition* (*N* – understanding the world through concepts) and ‘using the data to make decisions’ as a *Judging* function (*J*), with preferences for *Thinking* (*T* – working with logic and principles) or *Feeling* (*F* – making decisions on the basis of people and values). Finally, the model suggests that we express a preference as to whether to use our *J* or *P* functions to organise our (external world) lives.

²⁹ Bruce Duncan, *Pray Your Way: Your Personality and God* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2009 Reprint), 91-94.

difficulties. I therefore turn to my second set of literature – materials aimed at assisting churches with their inclusion of ‘autistic worshippers’.

2.2 Church Support Resources

My search identified a range of resources, the largest grouping of which originated in the USA. One Canadian resource was identified: Stephen J. Bedard’s *How to make your Church Autism Friendly*.³⁰ At the same time I was only able to identify three resources originating in the UK, all authored by the ‘autistic consultant on churches’ Ann Memmott: 1) her own web-based material, 2) guidelines (also published on-line) produced for the Diocese of Oxford and 3) the chapter “Including People with Autism” in the book *Making Church Accessible to All: Including disabled people in Church life*.³¹ A list of resources reviewed, with summary comments on each, is included as Appendix 1. Some general observations are relevant:

1. There was a noticeable difference in autism-related language between the UK (autism as ‘difference’) and the USA/Canada (autism as ‘intellectual disability’, ‘developmental disability’, ‘disorder’ or ‘handicap’) – suggesting cultural-paradigmatic variances which would need addressing before resources become ‘transferable’.³²

³⁰ Stephen J. Bedard, *How to make Your Church Autism-Friendly* (Ontario: Hope’s Reason, 2017).

³¹ Ann Memmott’s website *Autism and Christianity* is at <https://www.autismandchristianity.org>, the Oxford Diocese guidelines document *Welcoming Autistic People in our churches and Communities* is at <https://www.oxford.anglican.org/wp-content/uploads/.../Autism-Guidelines-2019.pdf> and the chapter “Including people with autism” is in Tony Phelps-Jones, *Making Church Assessible to All: Including disabled people in Church life* (Abingdon, UK: The Bible Reading Fellowship, 2013), 76-84.

³² Father Francis Hoffman, “First Communion for Autistic Child?” (*The Catholic Answer*, March/April, 2009), 20. This article illustrates this point as Hoffman uses the term “handicapped” in relation to autistic children.

2. The most common theological construct used to give autistic people validity was that of being created ‘in the image of God’ or of being ‘fearfully and wonderfully made’ (Genesis 1:27 and Psalm 139:13-14) – which I have argued elsewhere can be problematic, particularly when used in the context of disability.³³
3. Most focused on the needs of autistic children (and their parents). The UK resources were distinctive in addressing both autistic children and autistic adults.
4. Whilst the resources covered *social*, *sensory* and *cognitive engagement* it was noticeable that the emphasis was primarily on alleviating the autistic person’s ‘deficits’, although Memmott ³⁴ and Bedard³⁵ alluded to the positive contribution that autistic people can make.

What this review suggests is that positive aspects of church engagement with autistic cognitive distinctives have hardly been explored. It is this topic of the *cognitive engagement* of (high-functioning) autistic worshippers with their churches, and in particular with their ‘sacred texts’, that will occupy the focal point of this study.

³³ Stewart Rapley, “Liberation Theology: What does it have to offer as a Transformation Framework for the UK Autism Community?” (Unpublished essay: available from enquiries@nazarene.ac.uk, 2018), 4-5 & 17-18.

³⁴ Memmott, *Diocese of Oxford Guidelines Document: Welcoming Autistic People in Our churches and Communities*, 4 and also Memmott, “Including People with Autism”, 81.

³⁵ Bedard, *How to make Your Church Autism-Friendly*, 24.

3. METHODOLOGY AND APPROACH

In relation to the typology of theological reflection set out by Elaine Graham, Heather Walton and Frances Ward my investigation may be described as “Theology in the vernacular” on the grounds that autistic cognition creates features that could be considered as being associated with an ‘alternative culture’.³⁶ Investigating such issues requires that I note with Swinton and Mowat that these “[s]ituations are complex and complexing entities that are inhabited by hidden values, meanings and power dynamics.”³⁷

Practical Theology uses qualitative techniques when exploring “*meaning* and a deeper *understanding* of situations” in a multivalent context.³⁸ It is apparent, therefore, that a qualitative approach is appropriate here as I am dealing with the interaction of different perspectives and mind-sets. The purpose of my research in this investigation is to construct at least the requirements for a possible *Engagement Model* to support the *cognitive engagement* of autistic worshippers in their churches. I propose to structure my approach around Swinton and Mowat’s model for practical theological reflection - itself an adaptation of the ‘Pastoral Circle’ model developed by Joe Holland and Peter Henriot.³⁹ I have modified the Swinton/Mowat model slightly as the focus of my reflection is both theological and ecclesiastical. The resulting model is shown in Fig. 1, below.

³⁶ Elaine Graham, Heather Walton and Frances Ward, *Theological Reflection: Methods* (London: SCM Press, 2005, Second edition 2019), 15.

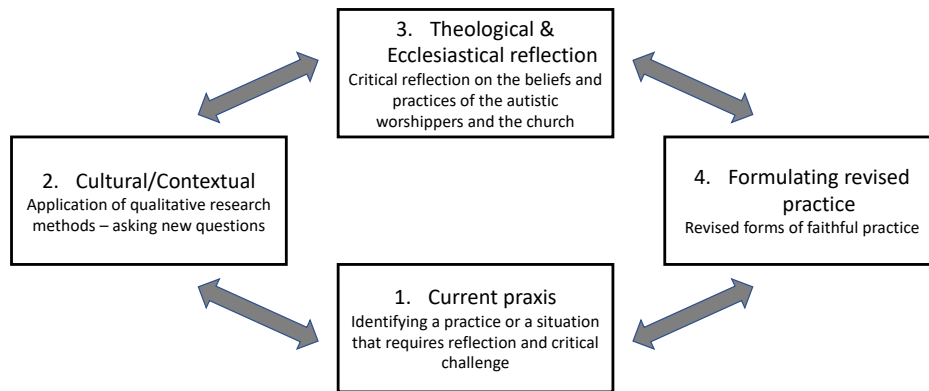
³⁷ John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London: SCM Press, 2006, 2nd edition), xv.

³⁸ Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 36.

³⁹ Joe Holland and Peter Henriot, S.J., *Social Analysis: Linking Faith and Justice* (rev. and enl. ed.; New York: Orbis Books, 1983), 7-9.

Fig 1: (Modified) Swinton/Mowat model for practical theological and ecclesiastical reflection

Based on: John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London: SCM Press, 2016, 2nd edition), 90.

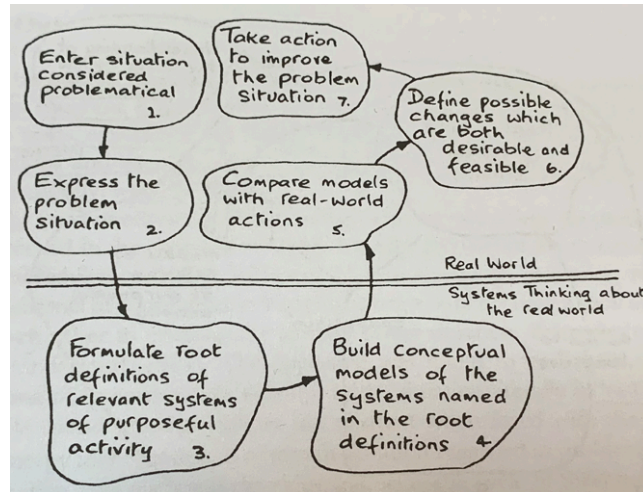


Within this framework I conducted data analysis on the basis of Peter Checkland’s *Soft System Methodology* (SSM – see Fig 2, below), a methodology which, in Checkland’s words, is “an approach to problem solving which would cope with messy situations in which objectives were themselves problematical”.⁴⁰ Given the complex interaction between the worshipper’s cognitive process and the established traditions and interpretations of the church, it is likely that both articulation of ‘the problem’ and of ‘potential solutions’ will require consideration of multiple ‘viewpoints’, which makes Checkland’s method appropriate.

⁴⁰ Checkland, “Soft Systems Methodology”, 64. In the case of ‘hard’ problems both the problem and potential solutions can be clearly articulated – for example an engineering problem. For most people-related situations neither the problem itself, nor potential solutions, can be immediately articulated as they both emerge out of an understanding of the viewpoints and interests of the participants – creating a ‘soft’ problem, in which even defining the problem is a complex process.

Fig 2: The 'Stages' of Soft System Methodology

From Peter Checkland, "Soft System Methodology" in *Rational Analysis for a Problematic World Revisited*, edited by Rosenhead and Mingers, p71



Checkland's concept of 'root definitions' (RDs) provides a framework for data analysis that generates descriptions of the situation as seen from the selected viewpoints in terms of "systems of purposeful activity (human activity systems) which are hopefully *relevant* to exploration of the problem situation".⁴¹

Each RD is structured by defining a viewpoint through a number of key elements under the acronym CATWOE, as indicated below:

C-Customer	"Who would be victims/beneficiaries of the purposeful activity?"
A-Actors	"Who would do the activities?"
T-Transformation	"What is the purposeful activity expressed as input → [T] → output ?"

⁴¹ Checkland, "Soft Systems Methodology", 71.

W-Weltanschauung	“What view of the world makes this definition meaningful?”
O-Owner	“Who could stop this activity?”
E-Environmental Constraints	“What constraints in its environment does this system take as given?” ⁴²

The term ‘Weltanschauung’ is not one that is commonly used in English discourse. Checkland explains that “[t]he usual translation [of Weltanschauung] is ‘worldview’, but this has a rather bland air, as does ‘point of view’. Our *Weltanschauungen* are the stocks of images in our heads, put there by our origins, upbringing and experience of the world, which we use to make sense of the world and which *normally go unquestioned*”.⁴³ Accordingly, I shall continue to use ‘Weltanschauung’ in conducting my analysis.

Checkland summarises that “well-ordered formulation of RDs yields a handful of definitions ... which can then be modelled for use in a debate about change”, a process which consists of using the various RDs to explore areas of potential agreement between them in order to create a single definition from which a potential ‘solution’ can be generated.⁴⁴ The data collected in the interviews was used to create RDs representing the perspectives of ‘autistic worshippers’, ‘churches’ and ‘neurotypical worshippers’ (or ‘congregations’) – acknowledging the simplifying assumption that a single RD can encompass ‘the perspective’ of such potentially polyvalent groups.

⁴² Checkland, “Soft Systems Methodology”, 75.

⁴³ Checkland, “Soft Systems Methodology”, 69.

⁴⁴ Checkland, “Soft Systems Methodology”, 77.

My survey of literature provided me with an initial sense of the issues at 'Swinton/Mowat' Step 1: Current Praxis. I then conducted qualitative interviews with nine autistic worshippers. I did not use a control group for reasons of timing, but also because my primary focus was to understand the perceived challenges encountered by the autistic worshippers themselves.⁴⁵ The data from this research was analysed on the basis of Checkland's model (stages 1-3) to produce RDs and subsequently provide the deeper, contextual, understanding of the current situation required by 'Swinton/Mowat' (Step 2: Cultural/Contextual). These RDs then provided the basis, through the 'Checkland' stages 4-6, for theological and ecclesiastical reflection concerning the beliefs of participants and their engagement with their churches and their texts and then for identification of potential changes to address the situation. Finally, the outcome from the 'Checkland analysis' was used to create an outline solution in the form of an Engagement Model Outline Requirements Template (see Appendix 3). I engaged a review panel of five church leaders to review this 'Template' from the perspective of practicality and asked the autistic worshippers themselves to review it for relevance. This provided a partial satisfaction of 'Swinton/Mowat' Step 4: Formulating Revised Practice within the scope of my investigation.

It is acknowledged that this qualitative study is limited in five respects – indicating a requirement for further work. First, the study only explored the views of a small sample. Second, as the sample was made up of people who were able to operate at the 'high-functioning' end of the autistic spectrum, I can say nothing about those with more complex needs. Third, my understanding of the perspectives of the churches and

⁴⁵ Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 38. Swinton and Mowat observe that "The randomized controlled trial is commonly viewed as the gold standard of all evidence".

of the neurotypical worshippers was provided by the autistic worshippers, rather than by the parties themselves. Fourth, this study used only one method to explore the situation and, fifth, I interviewed only autistic worshippers who were currently committed to their churches.⁴⁶ Extending the study to address the wider aspects implied here was beyond the constraints and scope of the current study – and so the findings from this study are offered as indicative and provisional accordingly.

⁴⁶ Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 48. Swinton and Mowat recommend the use of multiple approaches in such situations.

4. CLARIFYING ISSUES: AUTISTIC COGNITION ENGAGEMENT WITH SACRED TEXTS

4.1 An Academic Perspective

Olivia Bustion's paper *Autism and Christianity: An Ethnographic Intervention* challenges the tendency of much research in the science of religion to be underpinned (and in her view undermined by) many of the common scientific 'theories of deficit' that determine common understandings of autism.⁴⁷ Bustion describes two qualitative studies (Brezis 2012 and Visuri 2012) that "consist solely of one-on-one interviews between a non-autistic researcher and an autistic interviewee".⁴⁸ Bustion notes that both studies are "hypothesis-driven", assuming deficits such as 'mindblindness', poor 'central coherence' and weak 'executive function' proposed by researchers such as Baron-Cohen and Frith.⁴⁹ Bustion approaches her research through a different trajectory, 'lurking' on the 'Wrong Planet', 'ASPIESCentral', and 'Autism & Aspergers' online communities where autistic Christians exchange views. Bustion argues that such 'lurking' minimised the risk of researcher-bias contaminating the experiment, whilst the web-based format provided the autistic users with an ideal environment in which to exchange views as they "need not expend energy trying to detect and adhere to non-autistic people's expectations about eye contact, facial expressions, and speech patterns".⁵⁰ Bustion observes that the participants are able to dialogue about a trinitarian God, although with some distinctive perspectives (describing the Holy Spirit as being "like an unported source code that can configure itself to any operating system"

⁴⁷ Olivia Bustion, "Autism and Christianity: An Ethnographic Intervention", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* Volume 85, Issue 3 (Sept. 2017), 653-681, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfw075>

⁴⁸ Bustion, "Autism and Christianity", 662.

⁴⁹ Bustion, "Autism and Christianity", 655-656.

⁵⁰ Bustion, "Autism and Christianity", 665-666.

and suggesting that Jesus was “autistically obsessed with the kingdom of God”).⁵¹ Bustion concludes that “[b]ad assumptions [such as that autistic people, lacking in ToM, have poor self-understanding] ... lead to bad theologies. Better assumptions [such as ‘autistic self-understanding *is in fact* self-understanding’] ... lead to better theologies”.⁵²

4.2 A Corroborating Testimony

Christopher Barber, an autistic Christian, writes that “[p]eople with autism make connection with God ... in ways that may seem to be different and even odd to those observing us from outside the autistic spectrum”.⁵³ He concludes that “inclusion of people on the autistic spectrum within the Christian community demands recognition of their different attempts to connect with God, self and others”.⁵⁴ Barber notes with respect to a predominantly ‘theistic’ conception of God that, “I often find connecting and communicating with ... God-in-me, God-in-others and “God-out-there” difficult”, although he does acknowledge a sense of “kinship” at a human level with Jesus.⁵⁵ Whilst Barber’s experience is inevitably not identical to my own, I suggest that we share some common themes such as a drive for ‘systemic coherence’.

* * * * *

Through Bustion’s insights, amplified by a combination of personal and supportive third-party testimony, I have established a *prima facie* case that autistic Christians can demonstrate a distinctive approach to some aspects of their faith as a

⁵¹ Bustion, *Autism and Christianity*, 675.

⁵² Bustion, *Autism and Christianity*, 677.

⁵³ Christopher Barber, “On Connectedness: Spirituality on the Autistic Spectrum” (*Practical Theology* 4.2, 2011), 201.

⁵⁴ Barber, “On Connectedness”, 201.

⁵⁵ Barber, “On Connectedness”, 205, 206.

result of distinctive characteristics of the 'autistic mind'. I express this notion in the terms of the following hypothesis:

the distinctives of autistic cognition are such as to have the potential to yield valid understandings of our traditional sacred texts which may differ somewhat from the 'givenness' of traditionally accepted interpretations – such that the effective inclusion of autistic worshippers within the church can only take place once the church both acknowledges and makes accommodation for these distinctives.

This hypothesis was tested through the qualitative survey, which I will now describe.

5. DESIGNING THE QUALITATIVE SURVEY

Nine high-functioning interview candidates (a profile is included in Appendix 4: 94) were recruited against the following criteria:

1. Had been a professing Christian for at least three years.
2. Had a formal diagnosis relating to the autistic spectrum (I made an exception for one candidate for whom a house move had disrupted the diagnostic process, but who demonstrated traits of cognitive processing consistent with the other participants).
3. Had been involved in a church (preferably the same one) for at least the last three years.

Each candidate was interviewed face-to-face for approximately one hour using a questionnaire (see Appendix 2) on the following topics:

1. Their concept of God.
2. Their understanding of the nature of the Bible.
3. Their understanding of prayer.
4. Their approach to engaging communally with creeds, liturgies and hymns.
5. Their perception of their church's and congregation's 'position(s)' on these four topics.
6. The nature and effectiveness of any adaptations made by either themselves or their churches.
7. Any recommendations they offered for ways to improve the situation.

These interviews were recorded and participants were invited to proof-read the transcription (which seven did and two did not). The initial two interviews were

originally conducted as a pilot in order to check the questionnaire and the recording equipment. As both functioned effectively in these interviews, requiring no modification before further use, I have included the data collected through these interviews in my study.

6. REFLECTIONS ON THE QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS

It became clear during the interviews that views were emerging along a number of axes: the God concept was ‘more’ or ‘less anthropomorphic’, attitudes to the Bible ranged between ‘non-contextual/literal’ and ‘contextual/interpreted’, prayer was seen as somewhere between ‘relating’ (to God) and ‘being’ (in God’s presence) whilst engagement with creeds, liturgies and hymns was expressed as a balance between ‘community reinforcement’ and ‘truth reinforcement’. These axes made it possible to map and compare the resulting RDs, making visible ‘points of engagement’ – where alignment between church and worshipper provided a basis for good *cognitive engagement*. Conversely, areas where there was no such alignment indicated potential ‘*cognitive engagement risk*’. The RD mapping also made it possible to identify ‘clusters’ of common RDs along a composite axis of ‘Systematic – Relational’ (following the key drivers behind the cognitive process). The details of this analysis can be found in Appendix 4.

6.1 Findings from the Participants

Participant One (see Appendix 4: 95-98)

This participant attended an Anglican church described as holding to an orthodox trinitarian, theistic, theology and a conservative evangelical interpretation of the Bible, with a recent focus on becoming more inclusive, adopting a more ‘context-based’ approach to interpretation. Its approach to *cognitive engagement* can best be summed up by the RD:

Church-owned system for establishing worshipper cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive alignment with and assent to the sacred texts of the trinitarian, theistic, Anglican tradition, interpreted on the basis of prioritising ‘inclusion of the other’.

The congregation was seen as being supportive of the church, with points of engagement in each area, but was also seen as being independently-minded, with a more 'personal' understanding of God and prayer, a more 'communal' approach to liturgy and song and, for some, a level of difficulty in accommodating the more 'inclusive' interpretation of the Bible. This suggests the following RD for the congregation's approach to *cognitive engagement*:

Congregation-owned system for cognitive engagement with the church through broad cognitive alignment with and assent to the presented Anglican tradition on an independently-minded basis, modified by a more 'personal' understanding of God and prayer.

In contrast, the participant demonstrated a significantly more non-anthropomorphic concept of God as "alien to human thought" with a sense of prayer as "in the quiet of my own head" rather than 'conversing' with God and a strong balance in favour of focus on 'truth-claims' when it came to the creeds, liturgy and hymns. The church's 'inclusive' approach to Biblical interpretation and the participant's 'context-based' approach created a 'point of engagement' and can be described through the RD:

Autistic-Worshipper-owned system for cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive alignment on an 'inclusive' approach to the Bible whilst maintaining a non-anthropomorphic understanding of God and accepting the resulting 'difference' and associated cognitive engagement risk in the experience of prayer and praxis.

The participant was conscious of being 'different' and accepted this, although did suggest the possibility of a group to explore interpretation of the Bible in more depth. In addition, selective attendance was being used to manage risks to the level and quality of *social* and *sensory engagement*, but the risks to *cognitive engagement* were accepted as tolerable.

Participant Two (see Appendix 4: 99-102)

This participant attended a church in the Nazarene tradition, described as taking a trinitarian view of God, but emphasising His love. Their approach to the Bible was ‘conservative-evangelical’, leaning towards occasional direct-literal interpretations whilst prayer operated as conversation/interaction with God. Little or no use was made of liturgy, but creeds were occasionally used to convey truth, whilst (primarily modern) songs fostered a communal sense of God’s love. The approach to *cognitive engagement* might be expressed in the RD:

Church-owned system for establishing worshipper cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive alignment with and assent to the trinitarian, theistic, Christian tradition and Nazarene core values as expressed through a ‘culturally-contextualised’ approach to Biblical interpretation with the lens of God’s love as ‘Father’.

This participant saw the congregation as occupying a ‘spread’ of views around the church’s position. Their approach to hymns/songs was seen as being “more focussed on the experience than the words” with the result that “most people’s theology is [more] driven by their hymns than [it] is by their preaching”. In addition, there was a perceived tendency to see the Bible as God’s vehicle for ‘speaking directly’ to individual worshippers. This perspective might be described through the RD:

Congregation-owned system for cognitive engagement with the church through broad cognitive alignment with and assent to the presented Nazarene tradition in principle, modified by a more ‘direct and experiential’ understanding of scripture and emphasis on community.

It appeared that ‘points of engagement’ had been established through a shared conceptualisation of God as having a ‘personal dimension’ which could be encountered through prayer. There was, however, a sense of “church isn’t geared up for me”, which

the participant was prepared to live with. However, the participant also demonstrated a drive to establish a systemic/rational approach, pursuing individual theological reading, seeing God as “the reason and force behind everything” as well as personal and noting in relation to prayer that “my conversations with ... people are shorter [than is the case with neurotypical people]– why would I expect my conversations with God to be any different?”. This resulted in a sense of an ‘adopted’ and an ‘intuitive’ position. There was also evidence of a more contextual approach to the Bible and a focus on the logical coherence of ‘songs’. We may articulate this position through the RD:

Autistic-worshipper-owned system for cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive alignment with and assent to the church’s understanding of God’s relational nature whilst managing through personal reading and studying the cognitive dissonance arising as a result of maintaining a systemic, rational, approach to theological truth.

The participant was comfortable in managing the risks to *cognitive engagement* through personal reading and occasional ‘sitting out’ of activities. This strategy worked well enough to enable participation in the church leadership. The only ‘improvement’ suggested by this participant was a wish for the church to be more understanding of the fact that not everyone will respond to things in the same way.

Participant Three (see Appendix 4: 103-106)

My next participant attended a traditional Anglican church adopting an orthodox trinitarian stance. The Bible was understood as needing to be interpreted within the church’s tradition. Prayers followed the structured Anglican format, asking for God’s leadership and help, whilst the use of creeds, liturgy and hymns also followed the traditional Anglican format. This gave rise to a RD for the church as:

Church-owned system for establishing worshipper cognitive engagement with the church through alignment with and cognitive assent to the sacred texts of the trinitarian, theistic, Anglican tradition.

The congregation's position was seen as aligned with that of the church, perhaps with the exception of the creeds and liturgy, where they were seen as 'going through the motions'. My RD for the congregation is as follows:

Congregation-owned system for cognitive engagement with the church through broad cognitive alignment with and assent to the presented Anglican tradition.

This participant retained an explicitly 'childhood' perspective in which God was seen as an "old man", the Bible as "quite factual ... non-fiction", and prayer as formal and polite (like writing a letter to God, with the Lord's Prayer as a favourite); the participant had a somewhat indifferent attitude towards creeds, liturgy and hymns. At the same time there was a clear recognition that "[h]alf of me thinks that's what happened and the other half thinks it probably didn't". This potential cognitive dissonance was explained on the basis of not having the knowledge or skill to interpret personally and finding the church's interpretations "confusing", whilst observing in connection with the practical application of scripture, that "I'm pragmatic and I'm sure God is pragmatic too". The assertion of pragmatism hints at a potentially conditional *cognitive engagement* with the texts. Engagement with the church appeared more *social* than *cognitive* and I identified a single 'point of engagement' in the communal act of engaging with the church's praxis and described the participant's approach through the RD:

Autistic-worshipper-owned system for cognitive engagement with the church as a by-product from the social engagement generated by participation in the regular communal practices of the Anglican tradition (repeating creeds, liturgy and hymns) with disregard for the potential for cognitive dissonance between childhood beliefs and 'real-world' pragmatism.

The participant was conscious of being ‘different’, accepted this and saw no reason for the church to change. Whilst the participant appeared generally untroubled by the potential conflict between childhood beliefs and ‘real-world’ pragmatism, any cognitive dissonance risk arising directly in the context of church practice was managed by a process of “sanitising”, through which the participant would rethink ‘discordant’ things (such as ‘eating Christ’s flesh’ and ‘drinking Christ’s blood’ in the Eucharist), explaining, “I tend to see it as quite a literal thing ... so I ... think, “It doesn’t really mean what my brain is telling me it means – it means something different” ... putting it into words that are more acceptable”.

Participant Four (see Appendix 4: 107-110)

This participant also attended an Anglican church holding to an orthodox trinitarian theology and a conservative evangelical interpretation of the Bible. Whilst prayer was seen as operating within a ‘relational space’, the sovereignty of God was respected in terms of ‘answers’. The creeds, liturgy and hymns were seen as providing a good balance between reinforcement of belief and community. We can therefore use the same RD here as previously:

Church-owned system for establishing worshipper cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive alignment with and assent to the sacred texts of the trinitarian, theistic, Anglican tradition.

This participant also saw the congregation of this church as being well aligned with the church’s position, thus enabling us to re-use a previous RD:

Congregation-owned system for cognitive engagement with the church through broad cognitive alignment with and assent to the presented Anglican tradition.

The participant was aligned with the church in most aspects and I was able to identify many 'points of engagement'. In relation to the Bible and 'traditional texts', however, challenges were mentioned – in particular around being able to talk issues through to a conclusion and in the application of Biblical teaching where this required a response in the area of 'social behaviour' which may present distinctive challenges for the autistic person (the example of exhortation to 'encourage others' was offered). The other difficulty mentioned related to thinking that hymns/songs used by the church were occasionally "sappy" (over sentimental/emotional). We might use a fairly simple RD here:

Autistic-worshipper-owned system for cognitive engagement with the church through broad cognitive alignment with and assent to the presented Anglican tradition, supported by personal management of associated cognitive dissonance.

The participant accepted the sense of 'difference', was happy to live with what appeared to be only a low-level risk to the level and quality of *cognitive engagement* and did not think that it was for the church to make adaptations. Three suggestions for improvement were offered: the need for greater understanding by the church of autism, greater clarity of 'application advice' in sermons and a recommendation for having someone to go to with 'tricky' questions.

Participant Five (see Appendix 4: 111-114)

This participant grew up in the Salvation Army and now attends a Methodist church, which was described as holding to an orthodox trinitarian theology, but with an emphasis on God's 'paternal love' for and nurture of humans. The attitude towards the Bible was described as "not quite fundamentalist", whilst the focus in prayer was very

much around “community and communion” and worship was “all about {engaging with] your history ... for tradition’s sake”. Its approach to *cognitive engagement* can be summed up by the RD:

Church-owned system for establishing worshipper cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive alignment with and assent to the sacred texts of the trinitarian, theistic, Methodist tradition adopting a ‘soft-literal’ approach to the Bible and emphasising the ‘Fatherhood of God’, strong community and heart for the poor.

The participant saw the congregation as aligning with the church, whilst tending to be rather dependent on the church to ‘tell them’ about God, tending to be more literal in their understanding of the Bible, to see prayer as more relational and joining in hymns as a way of ‘communal belonging’ without too much attention to the words. My RD for the congregation is:

Congregation-owned system for cognitive engagement with the church through unquestioning cognitive alignment with and assent to the presented Methodist tradition, with a particularly strong emphasis on community.

The participant took the view that ‘God as a person’ was merely a “description” – that God is to be thought of more in terms of the force creating and sustaining the universe and all life. When considering the Bible, the participant’s view was that, whilst acknowledging the role of God in inspiring the writers (“it is a living text”), interpretation is required in order to ‘translate’ into our culture. The overarching theme was seen as God doing whatever would “advance humanity” and fulfil the command (from Mark 12:30-31 and elsewhere) to “love God and love your neighbour”. Prayer was seen as “direct communication [with God] – it’s not anything conscious, it’s your life, your thoughts”. When it came to considering creeds and liturgy the participant reported a low level of engagement with the exception of music, which did

provide a 'point of engagement'. I describe this participant's perspective through the RD:

Autistic-worshipper-owned system for cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive alignment with and assent to church values of community and "Love God – Love Neighbour" – particularly as expressed through communal music-based worship, whilst accepting/managing the cognitive engagement risk involved in maintaining a non-anthropomorphic conceptualisation of God.

There are several areas of 'cognitive risk' for this participant. Said risk is normally mitigated by the participant's approach of building engagement through "joining in", although this is currently difficult due to health issues which are driving the participant to adopt a limited/selective attendance approach. This participant, just as others did, expressed a desire for greater understanding by the church of autism and the resulting differences of faith response.

Participant Six (see Appendix 4: 115-118)

This participant attends a Methodist church described as "friendly". Its concept of God was seen as fairly traditional and trinitarian. The Bible was taught on the basis of being interpreted in our current culture. Prayer in the church was seen as very community-centred, with prayers for local people/events. The use of hymns was seen as providing a helpful link through the whole Methodist family. This gave rise to the RD:

Church-owned system for establishing worshipper cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive alignment with and assent to the sacred texts of the trinitarian, theistic, Methodist tradition emphasising the human incarnation of Jesus.

The congregation were seen as aligned with the church. There was, perhaps, some tendency to be somewhat more 'legalistic' over, for example, working on Sundays. My RD for the congregation is:

Congregation-owned system for cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive alignment with and assent to the presented Methodist tradition, with a somewhat legalistic approach to the application of scripture.

This participant's view of God was non-anthropomorphic, with God seen as "power, energy with no human form", yet also a God of love. This 'God of love' can be engaged with through prayer but is seen as non-interventionist in circumstances, rather strengthening us to bear things. The Bible is considered at once "very literal", with the primary concern being the words of Christ, whilst other passages can be 'discarded' if they clash with modern culture (perhaps by making comments regarded today as 'misogynist'). The participant's attitude to hymns was balanced between attention to words and appreciation of communal singing. I describe this participant's RD as:

Autistic-worshipper-owned system for cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive alignment with and assent to the church's value of community and tacit cognitive assent to church teaching and practice, whilst maintaining a non-anthropomorphic concept of God and an independent approach to the interpretation of scripture, with the associated cognitive engagement risk being accepted.

I was able to identify three 'points of engagement', although the participant's experience of prayer when at church would be reasonably aligned with the church whilst at home it would be better located towards 'being'. The level of *cognitive engagement* risk is being accepted – the participant is not aware of any sense of immediate risk and is accepting of the 'difference', whilst being supportive of the need for the church to develop a better understanding of autism.

Participant Seven (see Appendix 4: 119-122)

This participant was active in, indeed a priest in, the Catholic Church and served in a number of congregations in addition to being a member of a 'home church'. The position adopted by this 'home church' on the topics under investigation was seen as traditional and orthodox, in the Catholic tradition, leading to the following RD:

Church-owned system for establishing worshipper cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive alignment with and assent to the sacred texts and practices of the trinitarian, theistic, Catholic tradition.

This participant saw the congregation of the 'home church' as being aligned with the church, except in the area of the Bible, where they were likely to 'cherry-pick' preferred passages that 'speak to me'. I have defined the RD for the congregation as:

Congregation-owned system for cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive alignment with and assent to the presented Catholic tradition – as understood on the basis of 'personalised interpretation'.

The participant took a very traditional, Catholic, trinitarian, view of God, observing that "the Trinity is right at the heart of our religion and basically saying that life is about love". The Bible was seen as having "double authorship", including through the Holy Spirit, and as being interpreted/focused through the creeds and traditions of the church. Prayer was seen as "tuning in to a personal relationship with God" and the participant practised various forms of prayer. The use of creeds, liturgy and hymns was seen as having benefits in reinforcing both truth and community. The participant noted that theological education had assisted in 'filling in the (autistic) blanks' in terms of interpretations. I describe this participant's RD as:

Autistic-worshipper-owned system for cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive alignment with and assent to the presented Catholic tradition with the risk of cognitive dissonance mitigated through theological training.

As a result of this strong alignment, ‘points of engagement’ were in existence for each of the four dimensions with a low risk to cognitive engagement. The participant was, however, aware of being personally ‘different’ and, as with several other participants, identified better understanding of autism by the church as an area for improvement, although the impact here would be to strengthen *social*, rather than *cognitive*, engagement.

Participant Eight (see Appendix 4: 123-126)

This participant attended an evangelical Baptist church, which followed a trinitarian view of God with an emphasis on the relational aspect of being ‘led by the Spirit’ and prayer seen as the “engine-room” of the church, providing communion with and knowledge/experience of God at both individual and communal levels. The Bible was seen by the church as the “inerrant Word of God – God breathed”. Liturgy was seen as being used by the church as and when the Holy Spirit leads for building the community of God, particularly in house-groups. This gave rise to the following RD:

Church-owned system for establishing worshipper cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive alignment with and assent to the Biblical understanding of the trinitarian, theistic, Baptist tradition, with a ‘charismatic’ emphasis on evangelical interpretation of scripture and the personal experience of being ‘led by the Holy Spirit’.

This participant saw the congregation as supportive of the church position, but often missing out on full intimacy with God and suggested that their experience of the Bible was one of supporting the church’s view of its truthfulness whilst not fully relating

to it experientially. This sense of ‘missing out’ was seen in the prayer life of the church. The singing of hymns was perceived as being an exercise in ‘togetherness’ with minds often distracted by ‘domestic’ issues. My RD for the congregation is:

Congregation-owned system for cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive alignment with and assent to the presented Baptist tradition and interpretation of scripture, supported by some experience of the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

This participant indicated an extremely relational concept of God as “Father” and noted “I’m getting my intimacy there”. This ‘relational’ theme continued with the Bible, which was seen as a “conversation”. The participant was content to trust the Holy Spirit’s ‘real-time’ interpretation in terms of applying Biblical truth to daily life. Confidence in prayer extended to the expectation of healing or changed weather. There was not much liturgy at the ‘home church’, but the participant also attended a synagogue (as a ‘messianic Jew’) where it was used extensively and to which the participant’s response was a mix of worship and ‘truth-checking’. Songs at the ‘home church’ occasionally led to the response, “I can’t sing that hymn anymore”. I describe the appropriate RD as:

Autistic-worshipper-owned system for cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive alignment with and assent to the church values and expectation of direct personal experience of the Holy Spirit – with cognitive engagement risk mitigated through the compensating social and sensory engagement resulting from this ‘direct experience’ of God.

It was impossible to identify any formal ‘points of (cognitive) engagement’ from the examined areas – the only alignment cognitively appearing to be in the area of

shared values and expectations of direct experience of the Holy Spirit.⁵⁶ The resulting *cognitive engagement* risk was being mitigated by the participant's direct experience of God's love and sustaining power, but such a position is vulnerable to any change in this experience. The participant's situation is supported by a caring, if not overly informed (about autism), church. The participant supported the call for more autism awareness and education/training within the church.

Participant Nine (see Appendix 4: 127-130)

This participant engaged with two churches. The 'home church', attended with the family, was a charismatic Reformed church. Occasional personal visits were also made to an Anglo-Catholic church. The 'home church' was described by the participant as having a balance between an orthodox, trinitarian, theology and a more 'relational' position, observing that "you are not taught much of the theology of God ... [visitors] ... would struggle to find out who God is – apart from ... 'big Jesus'". Their view of the Bible was described as the "classic reformed 'sola scriptura' view", including 'love the sinner, hate the sin'. Prayer would also follow the 'relational' theme with an expectation of divine intervention. The use of creeds and liturgy was restricted – there would be a 'time of worship', which continued the relational theme by aiming to take people 'into the presence of God', but the participant valued the more liturgical content of the Anglo-Catholic service. This gave rise to the following RD for the 'home church':

Church-owned system for establishing worshipper cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive alignment with and assent to the Biblical

⁵⁶ This is potentially an example of the *sensory engagement* to which I referred in the Introduction and the experience of hypersensitivity which I identified in my "Review of Contemporary Literature on Autism and Spirituality" – see especially my comments on the work of William Stillman on p18ff.

text as interpreted within the trinitarian, theistic, Reformed tradition, including an emphasis on the personal nature of God.

This participant saw the congregation of the ‘home church’ as supporting the church position, although with a propensity to ‘re-interpret’ the Bible within their own context and experience. My RD for this congregation is:

Congregation-owned system for cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive alignment with and assent to the presented Reformed understanding of scripture, interpreted and applied within a personal context.

This participant took a traditional trinitarian view of God, supported by a view of the Bible as inspired by God and “authoritative ... infallible in the sense of its original texts”. The participant disagreed with moves in some churches to liberalise Biblical understandings of topics such as marriage, preferring the “Catholic/Orthodox notion of interpretation within church tradition”. A structured, regular, liturgical format to prayer worked for the participant – rather than the more ‘conversational’/emotional style (i.e. ‘Speculative’, rather than ‘Affective’ in Duncan’s terminology).⁵⁷ On the issue of creeds, liturgy and hymns/songs, the participant valued the clarity of the liturgical Anglo-Catholic service, adopting a focus on the veracity of ‘truth claims’ – with a conviction that “they [liturgies and creeds] make objective statements about God”, and a preference for songs of ‘substance’ (seen as more “objective ... but with emotion in them”), rather than the “touchy-feely” songs often used at the ‘home church’. I describe this participant’s perspective through the following RD:

⁵⁷ Duncan, *Pray Your Way*, 94-97.

Autistic-worshipper-owned system for cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive alignment and assent to the teaching and praxis of the trinitarian, theistic Anglo-Catholic tradition as a 'second church', mitigating the cognitive engagement risk associated with the 'home church', which is engaged with socially for family reasons.

I was unable to identify any 'points of engagement' from a cognitive perspective for this participant with the 'home church', and it was clear that attendance there was driven by non-cognitive factors. The Anglo-Catholic church provided a stronger basis for cognitive engagement. The cognitive engagement risk associated with the 'home church' is mitigated by this two-church arrangement, which had the blessing of the 'home church' leadership. The participant supported the need for education regarding autism, but saw accommodation as something for the autistic worshipper, rather than the church.

* * * * *

This process of 'Theological & Ecclesiastical Reflection' has now generated twenty-seven RDs defining church, congregation and autistic-worshipper 'viewpoints' (as described by the autistic-worshippers) on *cognitive engagement* with the church(es), providing the beginnings of a platform for advancing into the 'Formulating Revised Practice' element of the Swinton/Mowat model. Before taking this step, however, I explored these RDs for common themes, which resulted in a more focused set of RDs to support consideration of a way forwards.

6.2 Exploration of 'Common Themes'

Using the axis of 'Systemic' vs 'Relational' as a way of summarising the four axes used for each individual participant, I mapped all of the RDs on a single chart (Appendix

4: 131). This mapping highlighted five ‘Clusters’, which I describe briefly (Appendix 4: 132-139).

RD for Cluster One: ‘Systemic’ (Appendix 4: 133)

The ‘Systemic Cluster’ represented RDs in which autistic worshippers had expressed a strong drive for systemic integrity with low levels of cognitive dissonance. The price paid for this was generally willingness to experience heightened ‘relational dissonance’ – the sense of ‘not fitting in’. This was evidenced in the interviews by numerous comments to the effect of “their approach on this doesn’t work for me” but followed in most cases by statements to the effect of “I’m okay with that”. This acceptance suggests that the level of dissonance being experienced was sub-critical. Whether future events result in this dissonance becoming unbearable is a matter of speculation; I merely suggest that it is an area of risk.

In developing a RD to represent this ‘viewpoint’ it was clear that, in terms of the CATWOE analysis, there was straightforward agreement that the Customers would be the autistic worshippers themselves, who were also the primary Actors (with the support of authors that they read and, in some cases, alternative services attended) and that this would also be a solution that they Owned. The common Environmental constraints on any solution in this form would be the ability to sustain the main engagement with the church on some ‘non-cognitive’ basis – probably social – and also the need to sustain their non-anthropomorphic concept of God through means (e.g. reading) outside the church. Their sense of prayer was about being in God’s presence and their primary concern with ‘sacred texts’ was their systemic coherence. The reduction in cognitive dissonance secured through this approach was seen as being of a higher priority than the achievement of *cognitive engagement* with their church and so

we have a perceived solution which (Transformation) delivers cognitive engagement primarily through alignment with church values and non-cognitive factors. I

developed the following RD to describe this:

Autistic-worshipper-owned system for cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive alignment with and assent to church values, whilst maintaining an individual non-anthropomorphic God concept, sustaining engagement with the church on a non-cognitive (social) basis and accepting/managing the resulting cognitive engagement risk through a personal plan.

The question arises as to whether such a ‘position’ constitutes a valid theological option. Whilst a detailed assessment of the assertion that it is valid is beyond the scope of this investigation, a number of supportive observations are offered. Although representing a perspective outside of the traditional boundaries of the church, it is not uncommon in the history of the Christian faith to find individuals, or communities, adopting such a position. John Shelby Spong follows Paul Tillich in declaring that “God is not *a* being; God is the *Ground of Being*”.⁵⁸ This ‘otherness’ of God is contained as an aspect of the Trinity and testified to in scripture (Isaiah 55:8,9 as an example), whilst the great “I AM WHO I AM” in Exodus 3:14 hints at the ‘unnameability’ of God. At a practical level the development of the Methodist Quadrilateral suggests some acceptance of reason and experience as valid ‘lenses’, in tension with scripture and church tradition, for theological consideration.

⁵⁸ John Shelby Spong, *Unbelievable* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2108), 57.

RD for Cluster Two: 'Orthodox' (Appendix 4: 134)

The CATWOE analysis for the 'Orthodox' Cluster suggests that there was agreement with the 'Systemic' RD in the Customer and Owner aspects. In this case the church, through its teaching, becomes a key Actor and there is an Environmental constraint in relation to the need for the participants to adopt 'personalised measures' (attendance at alternative services, personal reading etc.) to reduce the risk of cognitive dissonance. The Weltanschauung relates to the superficial use of anthropomorphic language about God in what Kathryn Tanner calls "opaque human artefacts bound up with forms of life" in a Wittgensteinian sense, adding that "[even] [t]heologians seem to know that it is appropriate to say certain things about God without quite knowing what they mean by doing so".⁵⁹ Tanner concludes that this creates a state of "apparent incoherence" which, I suggest, is what gives rise to the cognitive dissonance experienced by these autistic worshippers.⁶⁰ Priority in this RD is given to *cognitive engagement* over cognitive dissonance, with the result that the dissonance needs to be managed separately. I have therefore suggested that the Transformation achieved is one in which *cognitive engagement* with the church is achieved through cognitive alignment with and assent to sacred texts at this superficial level in order to supplement *social engagement*, suggesting the following RD:

Autistic-worshipper-owned system for cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive alignment and assent offered at a superficial level to the church's trinitarian, theistic, concept of God and associated sacred texts

⁵⁹ Kathryn Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology: Tyranny or Empowerment?* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 11.

⁶⁰ Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology*, 18. Tanner explains that this is particularly critical where the difficulty arises over statements that are "central to Christian worship and belief – statements like 'Jesus Christ died for us' rather than statements like 'Jesus walked on water'".

whilst accepting and managing the consequential cognitive dissonance created between this 'adopted' and their 'intuitive' (Systemic) positions.

RD for Cluster Three: 'Relational' (Appendix 4: 135)

My mapping revealed two instances of participant RDs in a 'relational space'. In both cases there was also evidence of the participant demonstrating elements of the 'Systemic RD', suggesting not only a split approach, but also 'cognitive distance' from the church on both counts. In seeking to formulate a RD for this position it was clear that, once again, the autistic worshippers were both the Customers and Owners. I have introduced as Actors what I have described as 'authoritative voices' (in one instance the 'retained voices of childhood' and in the second the direct 'guiding of the Holy Spirit') which legitimise the use of an anthropomorphic view of God.⁶¹ In the Weltanschauung I have suggested a common adoption of a 'childlike' position of dependence with the associated assumption that deviation/disobedience would be likely to risk 'inaccurate interpretation'.⁶² This, I suggest, yields a Transformation in which engagement with the church is pursued on a non-cognitive (most likely social) basis, with the risk of cognitive dissonance mitigated through trust in the 'authoritative voice', rather than explicit *cognitive engagement* with texts. This case represents an extreme, fringe, adoption of the traditional trinitarian, theistic, representation of God, with a strong relational emphasis, rather than an 'alternative' position requiring validation. I developed the following RD:

⁶¹ Rapley, "Review of Contemporary Literature on Autism and Spirituality". Note my earlier comments which suggest that this may be an example of hypersensitivity-related experiences.

⁶² This approach to faith bears many of the characteristics of the 'Mythical-Literal' faith indicated at Stage 2 of Fowler's model of faith development, although a detailed analysis on this basis is beyond the scope of the present dissertation.

Autistic-Worshipper-system for establishing engagement with the church on a social basis whilst managing cognitive distance and avoiding cognitive dissonance by engaging with the church's sacred texts on a direct, 'externally sanctioned', basis.

RD for Cluster Four: 'Church' (Appendix 4: 136-137)

It was not surprising when mapping the RDs from the perceived church 'positions' that there is coalescence around the centre of my 'Systemic- Relational' axis representing a Weltanschauung based on the adoption of a view of God in the orthodox trinitarian and theistic Western Christian tradition, with some reported examples of an emphasis on personal and relational aspects of God, as experienced through the person of Christ and the activity of the Holy Spirit. Similarly, the approach to the Bible constitutes a balance between 'revealed-literal' and 'context-interpreted' perspectives with interpretation taking place within the appropriate tradition. The Customer was the congregation at large (implicitly, but not explicitly, including autistic worshippers), whilst the Owner would be the church institution/denomination, as moderated in the context of the local church, the Actors would be the church leadership (both ordained and lay) and the key Environmental constraint would be the requirement for the local church to operate within the boundaries of the appropriate tradition. I have described the Transformation as the *cognitive engagement* of worshippers through engagement with the sacred text and the Biblical teaching and tradition of the church, with the resulting RD:

Local-church-owned system for establishing worshipper cognitive engagement with the church through engagement with the sacred texts and values of the tradition, based on a trinitarian, theistic, concept of God and as mediated through the teaching of the local church.

RD for Cluster Five: 'Congregation' (Appendix 4: 138-139)

Again, there is no surprise to find a single cluster quite close (but mapping towards 'Relational') to that of the 'church'. The Customer is represented by the neurotypical worshippers in the congregation (I refer to them as 'congregation' for short, on the understanding that this does not necessarily include the autistic worshippers). The congregation is also, by virtue of its voluntary alignment (several participants noted that 'if they didn't agree they wouldn't be in the church'), the Owner, whilst the Actors include the church leadership in addition to the congregation itself. As an Environmental constraint in this instance I contend that there is a desire on the part of the neurotypical worshippers to engage socially with the church and that there is some limited latitude permitted/conceded by the church in respect of personal interpretation or practice of the tradition. I have argued that the *Weltanschauung* is the assumption that the church is an appropriate authority to 'say' what the truth is – that the adoption and support of the church's teaching is the 'price' of *social engagement*, but also the belief that individuals have the right to put a 'personal slant' on this, typically favouring the personal aspects of God. The Transformation here is *cognitive engagement* with the church through the cognitive alignment with and assent to church teaching. The resulting RD is:

Congregation (neurotypical worshipper)-owned system for establishing cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive alignment with and assent to the church's teaching and tradition, emphasising the 'personal' nature of God.

* * * * *

I now have five RDs representing three alternative ‘positions’ adopted by autistic worshippers, a typical church ‘position’ and a typical congregation ‘position’. My data set was too small to yield anything insightful from analysis by presented gender, reported age, church denomination, estimated congregational size, length of time since diagnosis, the time a participant had been a Christian and the estimated number of autistic worshippers in the congregation (Appendix 4: 145-162), although these would be potentially fruitful avenues for further research.⁶³

Before progressing to the final stage of the Swinton/Mowat model, in which I explore the possibility of changes of practice that might offer a potential ‘solution’, it is appropriate to pause and reflect briefly upon whether the outcomes from my qualitative research provide any validation of my hypothesis. The characteristics of the ‘Systemic Cluster’ would certainly indicate the presence of a distinctive cognitive process at work along the lines I have suggested in my hypothesis, and I have indeed argued (indicatively, if not conclusively) that such a cognitive process represents a potentially valid theological perspective. The characteristics of the ‘Orthodox Cluster’ offer weaker support for my hypothesis, except in the sense that the adoption of this ‘position’ did seem to be accompanied by some level of cognitive discomfort leading to my description of this as an ‘adopted’ position near the church with hints of an ‘intuitive’ position in the ‘Systemic’ space. The ‘Relational Cluster’ also offers evidence (albeit from only two of the cohort) of a distinctive cognition. I believe that this survey provides some *a posteriori* evidence in support of my hypothesis.

⁶³ I did notice, informally, that the focus of application for the cognition of (presenting) females seemed to be towards relational coherence, whilst that of their (presenting) male counterparts seemed to be towards conceptual coherence. This is, perhaps, a topic for further exploration.

It is also clear from the study that there is potential room for improvement in the church's understanding of and response to autistic worshippers. This leads me into Stage 4 of the Swinton/Mowat model, at which point I explore where a possible 'solution' might exist that could be acceptable to all parties.

7. FIRST STEPS IN BUILDING A CHURCH ENGAGEMENT MODEL TO CATER FOR AUTISTIC COGNITIVE DISTINCTIVES

I have included details of this analysis in Appendix 4: 140. Whilst the immediate Customer for our 'solution' will be the autistic worshippers, it is likely that both the neurotypical worshippers and the church at large will also be beneficiaries. Specific measures introduced to give worshippers additional support are likely to be valuable to all and churches will benefit from the greater engagement of autistic worshippers in the church community.

As to the Actors in such a solution, it would seem non-controversial to suggest that the church would be a key actor, with contributions at the local level (encouraging and supporting individuals), at the area/regional level (sharing scarce resources across a number of churches and denominations) and nationally (providing frameworks, guidelines and training), whilst contributions are likely to be required from both autistic and neurotypical worshippers.

The commonly required Transformation might be described as "cognitive engagement of 'autistic worshippers' with the church through the acceptance and deeper understanding of autistic cognition and the inclusion in church 'life' of provision to acknowledge, address and satisfy it". Consequently, our 'solution' will involve both educational and practical support components. The underpinning Weltanschauung might be expressed through the following assumptions as normative:

1. Autistic cognition is accepted as a 'valid expression of God-created humanity' within the Body of Christ and should therefore be both included in and nourished by the church – cognitive dissonance is not an acceptable price for social engagement with the church.

2. Autistic cognition is an expression of valid 'difference' – it is distinctive from neurotypical cognition.
3. Solutions that are critical for autistic worshippers in reducing/avoiding cognitive dissonance may also have benefits for neurotypical worshippers (e.g. in helping them to think more deeply about aspects of their faith).

As autistic worshippers cannot impose a solution on the church, I argue that Ownership of a solution can only be provided by the local church – though with the engagement and support of both autistic and neurotypical worshippers and also probably of the wider church. The Environmental factor required seems to me to be the provision of framework and guidance material (and possibly training) by the church and recognition that co-operation between local churches (both within and across denominations) may sometimes be required to make investment viable.

On the basis of these factors I propose the following RD:

Local-church-owned system for building the understanding and inclusion of autistic cognition as a valid expression of God-created cognition and the cognitive engagement of autistic worshippers with the church through inclusion in the life, praxis and programmes of the church of provision to nourish it.

Having established this conceptual definition of the likely solution, let me now review within this framework the practical adaptations and recommendations highlighted by participants. My vision is that, eventually, these adaptations and recommendations will contribute towards the formulation of a full *Engagement Model* for churches seeking the inclusion of autistic worshippers. I drew these elements together into a proposed Outline Requirements Template which aimed to set out the requirements relating to autistic cognition for such a future *Engagement Model*.

Adaptations and recommendations identified by participants are listed in Appendix 4: 141-144. One frequently-mentioned adaptation was the simple acknowledgement that ‘for me, things will be different’. Such an attitude manages autistic worshipper expectations but risks the eventual breakdown of engagement due to increasingly unrecognised/unmet needs. It is therefore important to identify more ‘proactive’ measures, the most frequently-mentioned of which was that of ‘selective engagement’ – attending/avoiding events on the basis of ‘what worked’ for the worshipper on a combination of cognitive, sensory and social factors. Participants mentioning this approach explained that their churches were happy to accept them taking this approach, whilst adding that it was not necessarily well understood by those churches. Other adaptations aimed at helping *cognitive engagement* were undertaking personal reading, taking time explicitly to re-interpret or re-think items from a service that didn’t make sense, and taking notes and drawing during sermons as a means of helping concentration. All of these adaptations appeared to take place with the acceptance of, but without any engagement from, the participants’ churches. Whilst, therefore, such an approach is of value to the individual worshipper in terms of reducing cognitive dissonance, there is the possibility that, without any reciprocal involvement of the churches, said approach also has the effect of heightening any ‘cognitive distance’ between the worshipper and their church – creating a risk to their *cognitive engagement*.

One participant referred to the benefit of a solid theological training provided by the church in preparation for the priesthood. Whilst, clearly, such an extensive step is not practical for all, it does highlight the potential value of well-targeted input, particularly in the area of hermeneutics.

Other adaptations were identified by participants as approaches to the issue of *social engagement*, such as finding a clear role in which to contribute and serve in a way that recognised the worshipper's social preferences. As these areas are outside of the scope of this exercise, I will not comment further on them.

It was interesting and of concern that, when asked what adaptations had been made by their churches, all of the participants reported that none had been made, although several added that that they would not necessarily expect the church to make any. It seems to me that, whilst such an attitude on the part of the autistic worshippers may appear to be an act of selflessness, such a laissez-faire approach on behalf of the church heightens the risk of 'cognitive engagement drift' referred to above.

The recommendations from my study fall into two categories – the first addressing 'education and understanding' and the second 'practical change'. There were also two recommendations made in relation to *social/sensory engagement* (suggesting the avoidance of halogen lighting and supporting the use of ear-protectors/ear-phones during music or other noisy sessions at services) which I mention here for completeness only.

Engagement Model – Outline Requirements Template

Purpose of the *Engagement Model*

The purpose of the *Engagement Model* is to provide a practical framework for use by churches which have autistic worshippers, such that those worshippers are able to be cognitively engaged with their church and the texts of its tradition in a way that supports their flourishing and which enriches the community of the church generally.

Composition Criteria

The *Engagement Model* must incorporate proposals to cover the areas of education and understanding as well as identifying practical steps to improve engagement.

Education and Understanding.

Education for churches needs to address the following issues.

1. The *Engagement Model* must provide a good, foundational, understanding of ‘autism basics’, establishing autism as relating to distinctive neurology which results in ‘differences’ in cognitive, sensory and social functioning (thus helping people to distinguish between those who are profoundly affected and those who may, in many ways, ‘appear normal’).
2. Education must cover contrasting understandings of autism as a ‘way of being’, as against autism as a ‘condition to be healed’ – the former understanding being preferred by the autistic community.
3. As a result of the education, churches need to develop acceptance of autistic worshippers responding to the presentation of material from the ‘faith tradition’ (for example a sermon) in ways that may differ from the response more generally from the congregation. This would have the additional, wider, benefit of helping everyone (neurotypical and autistic) to grow by appreciating alternative perspectives on faith and life.

4. Churches need to understand the need for autistic worshippers to manage their levels of cognitive dissonance and that this may involve worshippers attending church events on a selective basis – which should not be understood as indicative of or related to the level of commitment the worshipper may have to the church (indeed, autistic worshippers are, by nature, likely to be very loyal).
5. Churches will need to develop an understanding of autism which is sufficient to understand where potential ‘this doesn’t work for me’ points (and hence areas of potential engagement risk) might be for individual autistic worshippers in order to be capable of discussing these with the autistic worshipper(s) involved. This will involve awareness of the implicit or explicit assumptions being made about the nature of God, how this impacts prayer and about how we engage with text. In particular, it will involve an understanding of what Peter Vermeulen refers to as ‘context blindness’.⁶⁴

Practical Change

Churches need to consider taking practical steps in the following areas:

1. Establishing a mechanism (group within the ‘local church’ or across a group of churches in an area – either on a denominational or ecumenical basis, reading list etc.) through which autistic worshippers can explore the context and depth required in order to equip them in

⁶⁴ Vermeulen, *Autism as Context Blindness*. This refers to the ‘is there’ and ‘is not there’ elements of communication or interpretation discussed earlier.

the area of Biblical interpretation (and neurotypical worshippers too – but with the recognition that the autistic worshipper is likely to be less able to infer the ‘obvious’ than the neurotypical worshipper). One practical consideration that needs to be factored into the planning of any such group is checking that these worshippers are able to get to such a meeting.

2. Ensuring that practical ‘how to’ advice offered in sermons provides sufficient guidance (in terms of its unambiguous clarity and also in terms of any context-related considerations) to enable autistic worshippers both to access the advice and to avoid any pitfalls related to ‘naïvely literal’ responses. This will need to draw on the education built into the previous section.
3. Ensuring that there is someone available (again, in-church or across the churches in a locality) to autistic worshippers who has the necessary understanding, skill and availability to work through the questions raised by autistic worshippers. These questions may appear at first sight to be common to all worshippers but may well have specific aspects related to the distinctives of autistic cognition and result in unusually-debilitating levels of anxiety. An ideal arrangement, if practical, would be for this individual to be linked to a group such as that proposed in point 1, above.

Production and Format Criteria

Ideally, the construction process of such an *Engagement Model* should meet the following criteria:

1. It should be based on an extension of this study to include a wider group of autistic worshippers together with representation from both the church leadership and neurotypical worshipper communities.
2. Because of its subject matter, it will need to be both specific and concrete in its treatment of issues, whilst recognising the flexibility needed to accommodate a range of church-related implementation contexts.
3. Ideally, production of the *Engagement Model* will be conducted with the engagement of ‘experts’ with relevant experience – such as the Oxford Diocese and the NAS.
4. Recognising that the Engagement Model document needs to be accessible to both autistic and neurotypical readers and that autistic people are often ‘visual thinkers’ and often find indirect language (forms such as metaphor, simile and styles such as sarcasm) confusing, it should be produced using a mix of styles, including both verbal and visual, and use direct, unambiguous, language.

Quality Criteria

In order to be effective, such an *Engagement Model* needs to meet the following criteria:

1. The proposals contained in the *Engagement Model* must be agreed as both necessary and sufficient by autistic worshippers – possibly through a representative group.
2. The *Engagement Model* must be in a style and format that makes it accessible to autistic worshippers.
3. The *Engagement Model* must be workable for all parties, meeting the needs of autistic worshippers whilst respecting the needs of other worshippers and the constraints within which the church operates.
4. The measures proposed within the *Engagement Model* must be reasonable and practical for churches to deliver within the normal constraints on resources, buildings and funding (recognising the challenges often faced by churches this is likely to require some pragmatism, for example asking an existing 'home-group' to adapt rather than seeking to set up something bespoke, cooperating across churches to create a group or providing reading lists where groups are not practical).
5. The *Engagement Model* must align with (or at least not contradict) other related models used by churches to support the engagement of autistic worshippers – and potentially of other groups with special requirements. This should include identifying any inter-dependencies between the various cognitive, social and experiential elements (for example, any materials produced to support the development of cognitive engagement need to address any appropriate sensory

requirements such as (possibly) avoidance of white backgrounds in documents).

6. The *Engagement Model* should be ‘trialled’ in a small number of areas for a period of 12 months before being made available by its author on a national basis.

* * * * *

Both my cohort of autistic worshippers and a group of five church leaders were invited to review this ‘Template’ from the perspective of content relevance (autistic worshippers) and practicality (church leaders). The feedback received provided some assurance that this ‘Template’ at least represents a place to start in building a full *Engagement Model*. The ‘Template’, in its final issued form, is included as Appendix 3.

8. CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

I began by identifying three areas of possible interest in the engagement of autistic worshippers with the church: *social*, *sensory* and *cognitive*, signifying *cognitive engagement* as the area of interest for this study. Using my own experience, supported by examples of literature, I developed my definition of the nature of such cognitive challenges, which identified two relevant traits of autistic cognition, namely the drive to systematise and the processing of data that ‘is there’ with the corresponding blindness to data that ‘is not there’. These traits combine to create distinctive difficulties for the autistic worshipper in dealing with the sacred texts of the church and led me to develop a hypothesis, specifically that:

the distinctives of autistic cognition are such as to have the potential to yield valid understandings of our traditional sacred texts which may differ somewhat from the ‘givenness’ of traditionally accepted interpretations – such that the effective inclusion of autistic worshippers within the church can only take place once the church both acknowledges and makes accommodation for these distinctives.

Through a small qualitative research exercise in which I interviewed nine autistic worshippers about their *cognitive engagement* with elements of their faith, key texts and their various churches, I noted that, where worshippers were explicit about following their intuitive cognition they typically operated at a ‘cognitive distance’ from both their church and the congregation. This, I suggested, is likely to create areas of *cognitive engagement* risk, currently being mitigated through strong *social engagement* with the churches and also through personal compensatory measures. Other worshippers had ‘adopted’ a stance more aligned with that of their church and congregation, but at the expense of some degree of cognitive dissonance, once again

suggesting areas of cognitive risk. My tentative conclusion from this study was that it did offer some evidence that my hypothesis is credible.

Two types of recommendations emerged from my study: the need for education on autism to help churches and congregations move beyond what was seen as a superficial understanding, together with some practical steps such as the provision of help with Biblical interpretation and practical application of sermon messages, together with 'someone to talk to' who has the understanding and time to work through questions with autistic worshippers.

This brings me to the topic of 'next steps'. My study has clearly been limited in scope: there are other groups who could have contributed usefully to the survey (e.g. autistic people who have left church, neurotypical 'controls' and church leaders); a wider survey would provide a more reliable base of evidence. The topics of presented gender, age, Christian maturity or denomination of church would also be worthy of investigation. Additionally, further consideration of the assumed theological validity of the 'Systemic' position would be welcome.

Some excellent work has already been carried out, e.g. by the Diocese of Oxford, to put together guidelines for churches on the inclusion of autistic worshippers. I believe that the Outline Requirements Template that I have created provides the basis upon which such guidelines could be extended to address the areas of *cognitive engagement* that I have highlighted in this study. Such a step forwards would deliver benefits for the autistic worshippers but would also enrich the lives of the congregations and churches more generally through the more active inclusion of, and deeper engagement with, the distinctive contribution offered by autistic worshippers.

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APPENDICES

- 1. ANALYSIS OF CHURCH SUPPORT RESOURCES**
- 2. RESEARCH QUESTIONNAIRE**
- 3. ENGAGEMENT MODEL FOR CHURCHES WITH AUTISTIC WORSHIPPERS: OUTLINE REQUIREMENTS TEMPLATE**
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APPENDIX 1: ANALYSIS OF CHURCH SUPPORT RESOURCES

Document	Author(s)	Country of origin	Description of Autism	Group(s) addressed	Engagement areas covered
Chapter: "Including people with autism" Book: <i>Making Church Accessible to All: Including disabled people in church life</i> Published by The Bible Reading Fellowship, Abingdon, UK, 2013.	Ann Memmott (Tony Phelps-Jones book editor)	UK	Implicit in the approach of the book is the notion of autism as 'disability'. However, Ann Memmott's chapter refers (page 76) to autism as a "brain design difference".	Broadly aimed at adults with some additional content relating to children.	Primarily addresses areas of <i>social engagement</i> and related sensory issues (e.g. sensitivity to noise, lighting etc. – as distinct to openness to intense experiences, which I have termed <i>sensory engagement</i>). Some consideration of <i>cognitive engagement</i> in the context of need for structured information about church programmes of events (what's happening when) and also some input on 'visual thinking' as a common characteristic of autistic people (e.g. understanding sermons and other written material, including the church website).
Booklet: <i>Autism and Faith: A Journey into Community</i>	Mary Beth Walsh, Alice Walsh and Bill Gaventa, Editors	USA	Described (page 6) as:	In principle both adults and children, but most content is actually aimed at children and/or	Main focus is on <i>social engagement</i> with some content around <i>cognitive engagement</i> – mostly in the context either of needing

Document	Author(s)	Country of origin	Description of Autism	Group(s) addressed	Engagement areas covered
Published by The Elizabeth M. Boggs Center on Developmental Disabilities at UMDNJ – Robert Wood Johnson Medical School, Department of Paediatrics and Autism New Jersey, May 2008. Second printing, June 2011.			“spectrum disorder” “brain-based disorder”.	parents of autistic children.	structure around church activities or help with learning difficulties.
Booklet: <i>How to make your Church Autism-Friendly</i> Published by Hope’s Reason, Ontario, 2017.	Stephen J. Bedard	Canada	Described (page 2) as a “brain disorder”. Quotes (page 3) Lev 19:14 (English Standard Version) “You shall not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind, but you shall fear your God: I am the LORD” as basis for caring for people with autism.	Mainly children. Some content re ‘mildly’ autistic adults.	Works on the basis of helping the reader to understand and therefore empathise with autistic people. It provides practical hints and tips, rather than an overall structured approach. A majority of these ‘hints and tips’ are aimed at addressing issues related to <i>social</i> and <i>sensory engagement</i> . There is no mention of how to address <i>cognitive engagement</i> issues.
Workbook: <i>Autism and Your Church: Nurturing the Spiritual Growth of People with Autism Spectrum Disorder</i> Published by Friendship Ministries, Grand Rapids, Michigan, revised edition 2011.	Barbara J. Newman	USA	Uses predominantly (pages 21 & 22) the label “ASD” and follows the description set out in the DSM. Bases its (pages 15-19) ‘call for	Acknowledgement of both children and adults.	Provides 10 Strategies (pages 29-77) offering practical help. Strategies 4 (pages 49-52) & 10 (page 77) aimed at <i>social engagement</i> .

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			inclusion' on the principles: • Being made in God's image (Gen 1:27) • Being made for a purpose (Eph. 2:10) • Being made to belong (Rom 12:4-5) • Being 'fearfully and wonderfully made' (Ps 139:14).		Strategy 3 (pages 43-47) aimed at <i>sensory engagement</i>. Strategies 5-9 (pages 53-75) aimed at <i>cognitive engagement</i> issues – but in relation to helping people to understand the functioning of the church and 'the meaning' of the 'texts of our tradition'. Includes a section on "Behavior Management" (pages 79-85), which can relate to a <i>social engagement</i> issue arising from either <i>sensory</i> or <i>cognitive</i> dissonance or overload.
Workbook: <i>Steps: Forming a Disability Ministry</i> Published by Pen It! Publications, USA, 2018.	Dr Linda Barboa Shelli Allen	USA	Use of 'people-first' language ('person with autism' – page 10) rather than the UK-preferred 'autistic child'. Autism described briefly in line with DSM as a 'disorder' (pages 10 & 75) and also listed	Broadly general, but specifics seem mostly to reference children.	Main focus (pages 35-50 & 54-68) is on how to set up a ministry team to lead on Disability Ministry. Classroom Design and Intake Information forms recognise the need to address <i>social, sensory</i> and <i>cognitive engagement</i> issues.

Document	Author(s)	Country of origin	Description of Autism	Group(s) addressed	Engagement areas covered
			(page 75) under the heading ‘Common Disabilities’. Additional, more detailed, description (page 102) with reference to ‘processing sensory signals’. Biblical basis of inclusion uses (pages 9 & 10 – King James Version) – Ps 139:13 (“You knit me together in my mother’s womb”) – plus ‘made in God’s image (Gen 1:27) and ‘made for good works’ (Eph. 2:10).		
Article: “Church in the Making: A Niche of Welcome” Published in <i>Christian Century</i> (April 2, 2014): 45.	Carol Howard Merritt	USA	None provided in the article – but the Open Gathering community described clearly	Mainly autistic children with ‘visible’ needs (with special needs generally, not just autism) – but also seeks to minister to	Description of church community called Open Gathering – addressing largely <i>social engagement</i> , access and inclusion.

Document	Author(s)	Country of origin	Description of Autism	Group(s) addressed	Engagement areas covered
			has an educational component.	parents of autistic children (e.g. through provision of respite support).	
Article: "Review of 'Autism and your church'"	Tim Stranske	USA	Some general description of visible autistic behaviours (child sitting alone, rocking, repeating phrases etc.). Supportive of Newman's argument for inclusion based on 'made in God's image' – as being an argument from principle, rather than proof-texts.	Children.	Mainly <i>social engagement</i> . Stranske suggests that Newman, in an effort to be inclusive about 'autistic behaviour', has not addressed the issue of sin. This seems to rest on the (highly disputable) assumption of substitutionary atonement as the basis of our relationship with God.
Article: "A Place for Everybody: A Church at the Intersection of Faith and Disability"	Mark I. Pinsky	USA	Autism described as an 'intellectual disability'.	Children – in particular 11-year-old Walter.	Recognition of <i>social engagement</i> issues. Some reference to <i>cognitive engagement</i> in relation to need for structure and engagement with the liturgy and practice of baptism and (later) confirmation.
Published in <i>the Christian Education Journal</i> 4 no 1 (Spring 2007): 170-173.					
Published in <i>Congregations</i> 38 no 3 & 4 (2011): 28-31.					

Document	Author(s)	Country of origin	Description of Autism	Group(s) addressed	Engagement areas covered
Website: "Autism and Christianity" url https://www.autismandchristianity.org	Ann Memmott	UK	General description as a 'brain design difference' – and note that it is 'not a mental health condition'. Highlights typical traits associated with autistic people (loyal, honest, careful, specialists etc.). Broad assertion that 'I believe that everyone is created equal'.	General.	Briefly covers <i>social, sensory and cognitive engagement</i> issues. Comments on <i>cognitive</i> issues relate mainly to the need for certainty and structure in terms of 'what is going on'. Personal notes refer to the importance of 'what Jesus told us to do' – emphasising the tendency to systematise and look for 'rules'. Also notes, "I just chat to God. For me, he's a friend. Or I chat to Jesus. I've never been entirely sure what the Holy Spirit is, but that doesn't worry me too much".
Article: "Autism, the Mass and Religious Education" Published in the <i>National Catholic Reporter</i> (October 16, 2009): 26.	Tom Gallagher	USA	"Autism is a complex developmental disability linked to neurological disorders in the brain.... Symptoms include repetitive behaviours and difficulty with	Autistic children.	Focus on preparing children to take part in sacraments such as the Eucharist. Addresses <i>cognitive engagement</i> issues in the context of children needing visual representations to help understand the required content.

Document	Author(s)	Country of origin	Description of Autism	Group(s) addressed	Engagement areas covered
Article: "First Communion for Autistic Child?" Published in <i>The Catholic Answer</i> (March/April, 2009): 20–21.	Father Francis Hoffman	USA	communication and social interaction'. Implies that autism is a 'handicap'. Discusses the notion that 'low-functioning autistic children ... do not need the grace of the holy Eucharist because they are not responsible for the morality of their actions and therefore subjectively cannot sin'.	Children preparing for first Communion.	Addresses some points of <i>social engagement</i> (such as the need to belong, even if the formality of the Eucharist is not required on the basis of a lack of responsibility for sin). Addresses some <i>cognitive engagement</i> issues from the perspective of how to deal with learning difficulties.
Article: "Churches try to meet the needs of autistic kids" Published in the <i>National Catholic Reporter</i> (September 19, 2008): 19a.	Adelle M. Banks	USA	Gives little detail.	Children.	Describes The Haven as "a ministry for members with developmental disabilities such as autism, Asperger's syndrome or other conditions that may make sitting through a typical church service difficult or impossible". Gives little detail of what this involves.

Document	Author(s)	Country of origin	Description of Autism	Group(s) addressed	Engagement areas covered
Article: “Feeling the sacraments can be enough” Published in the <i>National Catholic Reporter</i> (May 22-June 4, 2015): 5a.	Amy-Morris Young	USA	Little detail but described as an ‘intellectual disability’.	Children – stretching to young adults.	Describes the process of developing an approach to Eucharist to include 26-year-old Nick. Focus is on <i>cognitive engagement</i> with the Eucharist liturgy.
Article: “Make room in the pew, and smile” Published in <i>US Catholic</i> (April 2009): 28.	Darcee Thomason	USA	None offered, but a description of some behaviours of a 6-year-old girl (Rachel) who is ‘severely autistic’.	Children.	General comments aimed at <i>social engagement</i> .
Article: “Raising Peter: What my son taught me about my faith” Published in <i>America</i> 212 no 6 (Feb 23, 2015): 27-29.	Mary Beth Werdel	USA	General description of Peter’s difficulties, deficits and challenges in development. Describes prayers for ‘normalcy’. (page 29)	Children – Peter, aged 4.	Relates to how Peter’s <i>sensory</i> issues (hearing the bells) were dealt with. Describes a shift in <i>social</i> and <i>cognitive engagement</i> from prayer for “normalcy” to prayer for “flourishing”.
Article: “My Asperger’s and my ministry: Why I dread pastoral visits” Published in <i>Christian Century</i> (May 13, 2015): 11-12.	Dennis Sanders	USA	Describes an adult (the author) with Asperger’s syndrome. General description, “Asperger’s is not	General audience.	Broad description of issues involved regarding particularly <i>social engagement</i> from the perspective of church leadership.

Document	Author(s)	Country of origin	Description of Autism	Group(s) addressed	Engagement areas covered
			just a communication disorder; it's also a sensory disorder" (page 11).		
Web-based document: "Welcoming Autistic People in our Churches and Communities" Published by Diocese of Oxford on the web at url https://www.oxford.anglican.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Autism-Guidelines-2019.pdf	Ann Memmott	UK	Document clearly states up front that "Autism, which is sometimes called Asperger syndrome, is a brain wiring difference. It is present at birth and remains different for life. It is not a mental health condition". Provides a very rounded view of both the challenges faced by autistic people and the positive traits that they may offer.	Addresses both children and adults.	Provides a fairly comprehensive coverage of the aspects of church life from the perspectives of <i>social, sensory</i> and <i>cognitive engagement</i> . The <i>cognitive engagement</i> aspects relate to the need for order and clear instructions in church life and services, and also to the likely difficulties involved in accessing/understanding some aspects of 'the faith' as presented. There is no suggestion that an autistic person 'thinking differently' may imply a different theological perspective.
UK Programme launch event: Champions Club	Craig Johnson	USA	Based on 'launch seminar' only – impression is that autism is seen as an 'affliction', so capable of being	Programme initially targeted at children with special needs – but the Champions Club model can be extended to Teens	Difficult to assess in detail without reviewing the curriculum, but launch event touched on <i>sensory, social</i> and <i>cognitive engagement</i> issues –

Document	Author(s)	Country of origin	Description of Autism	Group(s) addressed	Engagement areas covered
Programme created by Lakewood Church, Houston, Texas and currently being launched in the UK. Summary following attendance at a publicity event, rather than a review of literature.			healed – but also to be accepted as God's grace meant to demonstrate His glory (as in 'thorn in the flesh' in 2 Cor 12:7 and also the words of Jesus about the blind man in John 9:1-3).	with special needs and also to Adults with special needs.	although the suggestion seemed to be that this is in the context that the <i>cognitive</i> aspect was about how to assist people with learning difficulties to access a 'given' faith/tradition, rather than suggesting that the 'autistic cognition' called for or allowed a different 'take'.

APPENDIX 2: RESEARCH QUESTIONNAIRE

Introduction

Thank you for being willing to support me in carrying out this research. Hopefully you will find the experience enjoyable, helpful and interesting from your own perspective.

The questionnaire which follows forms a key component of my work. I am keen to get an 'autistic voice' on this topic and, in particular, to understand what advice and thoughts you may have for your church (or 'the Church' in general) about how to make it easier for you and for other people on the autistic spectrum to engage with it.

I will use the questions below to structure a discussion with you on the topic. I have endeavoured to make the questions open-ended in order to give you as much freedom as possible to say what you want to say, whilst keeping us within some limits so that I can relate a number of similar discussions together to see where they agree and/or offer different perspectives.

Our discussion will be in the form of an 'interview'. On this occasion we are interested in your views – my role is purely to facilitate you in being able to say what you want to. When I describe this discussion as an 'interview', please be assured that this is not like a job interview where you will either succeed or fail depending on how you answer questions – I am simply interested in what you have to say.

A few points to note before we start:

- Having said that your views are relevant, which they are, we do need to stick to the topic to make the study of any use – so here are a few pointers to help you be clear on my focus:
 - I am looking at the issues faced by adults, not children
 - I am looking specifically at engagement with the written, verbal, aspects of our faith (scriptures, creeds, liturgy, prayers, hymns etc.) – I am aware that there are other potential issues for autistic people in engaging with church
 - I need to keep the discussion focused on the areas that can be addressed by the Church – so we need to focus on relating thoughts to the Christian faith.
 - To keep the questionnaire easy to understand I have structured the main sections around the same 4 themes to explore both your views and your understanding of your church:
 - **Concept of God** – when we use the word 'God' what (or who?) do we have in mind – what (or who?) do we think God is (or is like)?;
 - **Approach to Scripture** – when we read the Bible, what do we think it is and what assumptions do we make about how much freedom or space we have to interpret it when moving from the text to application in our context?;
 - **Approach to Prayer** – prayer comes in all sorts of formats and is carried out through all sorts of practices – what works (or doesn't) for you in terms of expressing your Christian spirituality?;
 - **Approach to other written material** (creeds, liturgy, hymns etc.) – how do you deal with them in terms of what they might mean or convey in terms of your Christian spirituality?
- If you have any difficulty, either before or during the 'interview', in understanding what a question is getting at, then I am more than happy for you to ask for help.

Section 1: Some basic facts about you.

This information will help me to keep my work organised throughout the research and to get in touch with you if I need to – it will not be used as part of the survey or subsequent analysis and will not appear in my final report.

Your Name: _____

Best method of contacting you (please tick the appropriate item):

Mobile Phone	☐	Number	
Email	☐	Address	
Other	☐	Details	

Section 2: Establishing a starting point: your profile.

This information will provide helpful context about you and about your church involvement so that what you tell me in the rest of the session makes more sense to me, both at the time and when I review my notes afterwards.

Please can you tell me a bit about yourself.

2.1 Roughly how long ago is it since you first considered yourself to be a Christian?	
2.2 What sort of Church do you go to? (denomination, high/low, evangelical/charismatic/liberal etc.).	
2.3 How long have you been attending? (approximate number of years is fine).	
2.4 How do you participate/engage there? (just attend/home-group leader/in choir etc.	

2.5 As far as you are aware, roughly how many other people 'on the autistic spectrum' are there in your church?	
2.6 When did you receive your diagnosis in relation to the 'autism spectrum'?	
Section 3: Understanding your personal perspective	
<i>This section invites you to tell me something about the way that you think about key elements of the Christian faith that are used in the Church context.</i>	
3.1 How would you describe your own concept of God?	
3.2 We describe the Bible in a number of ways ('The Word of God', 'Divinely Inspired' etc.) and we interpret it in many ways (literal, allegorical etc.). How would you describe your own way of thinking about the Bible and how to deal with what it says?	
3.3 Of the various styles of prayer that you have come across and tried – which do you find the most meaningful – and what do you see as happening when you pray?	

3.4 We are often called upon in church to recite, sing and read other documents /texts (creeds, liturgy etc.) as part of a service. How do you engage with these texts mentally (just say/sing the words without thinking about what they mean, argue in your head with every word etc.) in terms of their truth content/claims?	
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Section 4: Understanding how you see your church functioning

This section invites you to look at the same topics, but this time to look at them from the viewpoint of the church and how they are 'presented' to you. Of course, there may be some variations from time to time as different ones preach or lead prayers – but I am looking to understand the common 'view of the world' that is conveyed 'from the front' - and so comes either directly from the leadership or at least with their endorsement – at your church.

4.1 How would you describe the 'concept of God' typically assumed 'from the front' in your church?	
4.2 How would you describe your church's way of thinking about the Bible and how to deal with what it says?	
4.3 In the prayers that are used 'from the front' at your church – what do you see as being the understood view (by those leading) of what is happening when they pray?	

4.4 When creeds, liturgy, hymns etc. are used in your church, what do you think whoever is leading is expecting you to do by way of engaging with them and their truth content/claims?	
Section 5: How you see ‘others’ at your church functioning	
<i>This section invites you to look, as it were, sideways at those who are also involved in your church and who are ‘neurotypical’ (i.e. not autistic). How do you see them engaging with these factors – is this the same as for you, or are there differences? Of course, there may well be a range of views in some areas.</i>	
5.1 How would you describe the ‘concept of God’ typically assumed by ‘others’ in your church?	
5.2 How would you describe the way that ‘others’ in your church think about the Bible and how to deal with what it says?	
5.3 What do you understand of the way in which ‘others’ in your church think about what is happening when we pray?	

5.4 When creeds, liturgy, hymns etc. are used in your church, how do you think that 'others' engage with them and their truth content/claims?	
Section 6: Understanding the 'adaptations' that you have made	
<i>This section is your opportunity to tell me about anything that you have done in addition to what your church offers as a means of expressing and satisfying your faith and spirituality. Without wishing to constrain what you might want to say . . . I have in mind things such as joining additional groups or finding your own books to read.</i>	
6.1 What adaptations or additional measures have you taken (if any), over and above what your church offers, in order to develop and express your faith and spirituality?	
6.2 Does your church know about these and, if so, what has been its reaction?	

Section 7: Understanding the ‘adaptations’ that your church has made or could make.

This section is your opportunity to tell me about anything that you think your church has done to recognise and accommodate your requirements (please note, we are focusing here on the way you think and see things).

7.1 What steps, if any, have your church taken in order to recognise any special requirements you may have in how you think about and engage with the written aspects of our faith?

7.2 How well has this worked for you?

7.3 What additional adaptations would you like to see your church make?

Section 8: Wrap up

And finally: this is your opportunity to mention anything else that you think is relevant, but which we haven't covered so far.

8.1 Is there anything else that you think is relevant to this study which we have not covered?

What I will do next

Thank you so much for taking the time out to work with me on this – it is much appreciated!

I will now use the recording of our discussion to fill in this form creating a draft transcript of what you have told me.

I will then send the draft transcript to you for you to check/amend/correct (and by all means add the odd thought that came to you after the event!). Hopefully we can do this in one cycle, but sometimes it is necessary to go through this loop a couple of times to get things right.

Once I have completed all of the interviews and agreed all of the transcripts, I will analyse them to see what they tell me in terms of the key criteria or requirements that churches need to address in order to cater for the ‘cognitive distinctives’ of autistic people in their fellowships.

In the background I will also have done some reading of things written by authors on this topic.

I will use all of this input to create what I have called an ‘Outline Requirements Template’ – a document that describes and defines what would need to go into an ‘Engagement Model’ in this area to make it effective.

I will send you a copy of this ‘Outline Requirements Template’ for you to review on the basis that it represents a fair statement based on what you, and others, have told me. Once again, we will ‘loop round’ until I have good agreement that the document is workable.

In parallel with this, I will also ask a selected (small) group of church leaders to review the document. What I need from them is some assurance that what it contains is realistic and practicable in terms of what can be done by a church.

In this way, I will have a document that has both the endorsement of a (small) group of ‘autistic worshippers’ in terms of its authenticity and also the endorsement of a (small) group of church leaders in terms of its practicability.

Once again, my thanks for your thoughts and time. I look forward to seeing the result!

APPENDIX 3

ENGAGEMENT MODEL FOR CHURCHES WITH AUTISTIC WORSHIPPERS: OUTLINE REQUIREMENTS TEMPLATE

OUTLINE REQUIREMENTS FOR AN ENGAGEMENT MODEL: HOW CHURCHES CAN ACCOMMODATE THE POTENTIAL COGNITIVE DISTINCTIVES OF ADULTS ON THE AUTISTIC SPECTRUM	
Version No.: 1.01 (Final, with minor corrections)	Date: 30 July 2019
1. PURPOSE	<i>What is the purpose that must be satisfied by the Engagement Model?</i> The purpose of the <i>Engagement Model</i> is to provide a practical framework for use by churches which have autistic worshippers, such that those worshippers are able to be cognitively engaged with their church and the texts of its tradition in a way that supports their flourishing and which enriches the community of the church generally.
2. COMPOSITION CRITERIA	<i>What are the requirements for 'contents' elements for the Engagement Model to be effective?</i> The <i>Engagement Model</i> must incorporate proposals to cover the areas of education and understanding as well as identifying practical steps to improve engagement. Education and Understanding. Education for churches needs to address the following issues: 1. The <i>Engagement Model</i> must provide a good, foundational, understanding of 'autism basics', establishing autism as relating to distinctive neurology which results in 'differences' in cognitive, sensory and social functioning (thus helping people to distinguish between those who are profoundly affected and those who may, in many ways, 'appear normal'). 2. Education must cover contrasting understandings of autism as a 'way of being', as against autism as a 'condition to be healed' – the former understanding being preferred by the autistic community. 3. As a result of the education churches need to develop acceptance of autistic worshippers responding to the presentation of material from the 'faith tradition' (for example a sermon) in ways that may differ from the response more generally from the congregation. This would have the additional, wider, benefit of helping everyone (neurotypical and autistic) to grow by appreciating alternative perspectives on faith and life. 4. Churches need to understand the need for autistic worshippers to manage their levels of cognitive dissonance and that this may involve worshippers attending church events on a selective basis – which should not be understood as indicative of or related to the level of commitment the worshipper may have to the church (indeed, autistic worshippers are, by nature, likely to be very loyal). 5. Churches will need to develop an understanding of autism sufficient to understand where potential 'this doesn't work for me' points (and hence areas of potential engagement risk) might be for individual autistic worshippers in order to be capable of discussing these with the autistic worshipper(s) involved. This will involve awareness of the implicit or

	explicit assumptions being made about the nature of God, how this impacts prayer and about how we engage with text. In particular it will involve an understanding of what Peter Vermeulen refers to as ‘context blindness’.¹ Practical Change Churches need to consider taking practical steps in the following areas 1. Establishing a mechanism (group within the ‘local Church’ or across a group of Churches in an area, either on a denominational or ecumenical basis, reading list etc.) through which autistic worshippers can explore the context and depth required in order to equip them in the area of Biblical interpretation (and neurotypical worshippers too – but with the recognition that the autistic worshipper is likely to be less able to infer the ‘obvious’ than the neurotypical worshipper). One practical consideration that needs to be factored into the planning of any such group is checking that these worshippers are able to get to such a meeting. 2. Ensuring that practical ‘how to’ advice offered in sermons provides sufficient guidance (in terms of its unambiguous clarity and also in terms of any context-related considerations) to enable autistic worshippers both to access the advice and to avoid any pitfalls related to ‘naïvely literal’ responses. This will need to draw on the education built into the previous section. 3. Ensuring that there is someone available (again, in-Church or across the Churches in a locality) to autistic worshippers who has the necessary understanding, skill and availability to work through the questions raised by autistic worshippers. These questions may appear at first sight to be common to all worshippers but may well have specific aspects related to the distinctives of autistic cognition and result in unusually debilitating levels of anxiety. An ideal arrangement, if practical, would be for this individual to be linked to a group such as that proposed in point 1, above.
3. PRODUCTION AND FORMAT CRITERIA	<i>What are the criteria that must be satisfied in relation to the creation of the Engagement Model in order for it to be considered credible?</i> Ideally, the construction process of such an <i>Engagement Model</i> should meet the following criteria. 1. It should be based on an extension of this study to include a wider group of autistic worshippers together with representation from both the church leadership and neurotypical worshipper communities. 2. Because of its subject matter it will need to be both specific and concrete in its treatment of issues, whilst recognising the flexibility needed to accommodate a range of church-related implementation contexts. 3. Ideally, production of the <i>Engagement Model</i> will be conducted with the engagement of ‘experts’ with relevant experience – such as the Oxford Diocese and the NAS. 4. Recognising that the <i>Engagement Model</i> document needs to be

¹ Vermeulen, *Autism as Context Blindness*. Communication is often comprised of what ‘is there’ (or ‘is said’) and also what ‘is not there’ (or ‘is not said’). Neurotypical people, when presented with a situation or a text, use both the information that (literally) ‘is there’ and also information that is ‘not there’, but which is inferred from context in the form, perhaps, of ‘reading’ body language, facial expression or ironic/sarcastic intent or of applying ‘accepted cultural norms’ in order to interpret meaning. Autistic cognition deals poorly, or not at all, with this ‘context-related’ information, leaving the autistic person with only the literal ‘is there’ information.

	accessible to both autistic and neurotypical readers and that autistic people are often ‘visual thinkers’ and often find indirect language (forms such as metaphor, simile and styles such as sarcasm) confusing, it should be produced using a mix of styles, including both verbal and visual, and use direct, unambiguous, language.
4. QUALITY CRITERIA	<i>How will we test (process and people) to confirm that the Engagement Model is capable of meeting its purpose (as stated above)?</i> In order to be effective, such an <i>Engagement Model</i> needs to meet the following criteria. 1. The proposals contained in the <i>Engagement Model</i> must be agreed as both necessary and sufficient by autistic worshippers – possibly through a representative group. 2. The <i>Engagement Model</i> must be in a style and format that makes it accessible to autistic worshippers. 3. The <i>Engagement Model</i> must be workable for all parties, meeting the needs of autistic worshippers whilst respecting the needs of other worshippers and the constraints within which the church operates. 4. The measures proposed within the <i>Engagement Model</i> must be reasonable and practical for churches to deliver within the normal constraints on resources, buildings and funding (recognising the challenges often faced by churches this is likely to require some pragmatism, for example asking an existing ‘home-group’ to adapt rather than seeking to set up something bespoke, co-operating across churches to create a group or providing reading lists where groups are not practical). 5. The <i>Engagement Model</i> must align with (or at least not contradict) other related models used by churches to support the engagement of autistic worshippers – and potentially of other groups with special requirements. This should include identifying any inter-dependencies between the various cognitive, social and experiential elements (for example, any materials produced to support development of cognitive engagement needed to address any appropriate sensory requirements such as (possibly) avoidance of white backgrounds in documents). 6. The <i>Engagement Model</i> should be ‘trialled’ in a small number of areas for a period of 12 months before being made available by its author on a national basis.

Appendix 4

Data Analysis of Qualitative Interviews

INTERVIEW PARTICIPANT PROFILE

Attribute	Category	No.
Time a Christian	More than 10 years 5 - 10 years	8 1
Church attended	Anglican Methodist Catholic Nazarene Independent Reformed Baptist	3 2 1 1 1 1
Estimated autistic people in congregation	Up to 5 6 - 10	8 1
Congregation size	Up to 50 200+	5 4
Time since diagnosis	Less than 5 years 5 - 10 years 11+ years	4 1 4
Age*	18 - 30 31 - 60 61+	2 5 2
Gender*	Presenting as male Presenting as female	5 3

* This data was not formally requested in the interviews. All participants, however, verbally informed me of their age. In terms of gender, I have simply noted in the table my own perception of how the participants presented.

Participant 1: Root Definition 1 – ‘Church’ perspective

Church-owned system for establishing worshipper cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive alignment with and assent to the sacred texts of the trinitarian, theistic, Anglican tradition, interpreted on the basis of prioritising ‘inclusion of the other’.	
Customer	Church institution, congregation.
Actors	Church leaders and 'approved' laity.
Transformation	Cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive alignment with and assent to the teaching and practice of the church.
Weltanschauung	Traditional trinitarian, theistic, conception of God - God engages and intervenes directly with the world and his people. Bible needs to be re-interpreted in the modern cultural context - ‘otherness’ is to be welcomed as part of God’s ‘normality’, rather than being seen as ‘deviation’ – and those seen as ‘other’ welcomed, not judged (‘inclusion’). Being, and engaging with God as the People of God is important and a key part of services - creeds, liturgy, hymns reinforce the faith tradition communally.
Owner	Church institution - as moderated by the local church.
Environment	Faithfulness to denominational formulations of the Tradition. Real-life events in the history of the congregation that have precipitated some re-thinking about ‘otherness’ and ‘difference’.

Participant 1: Root Definition 2 – ‘Congregation’ perspective

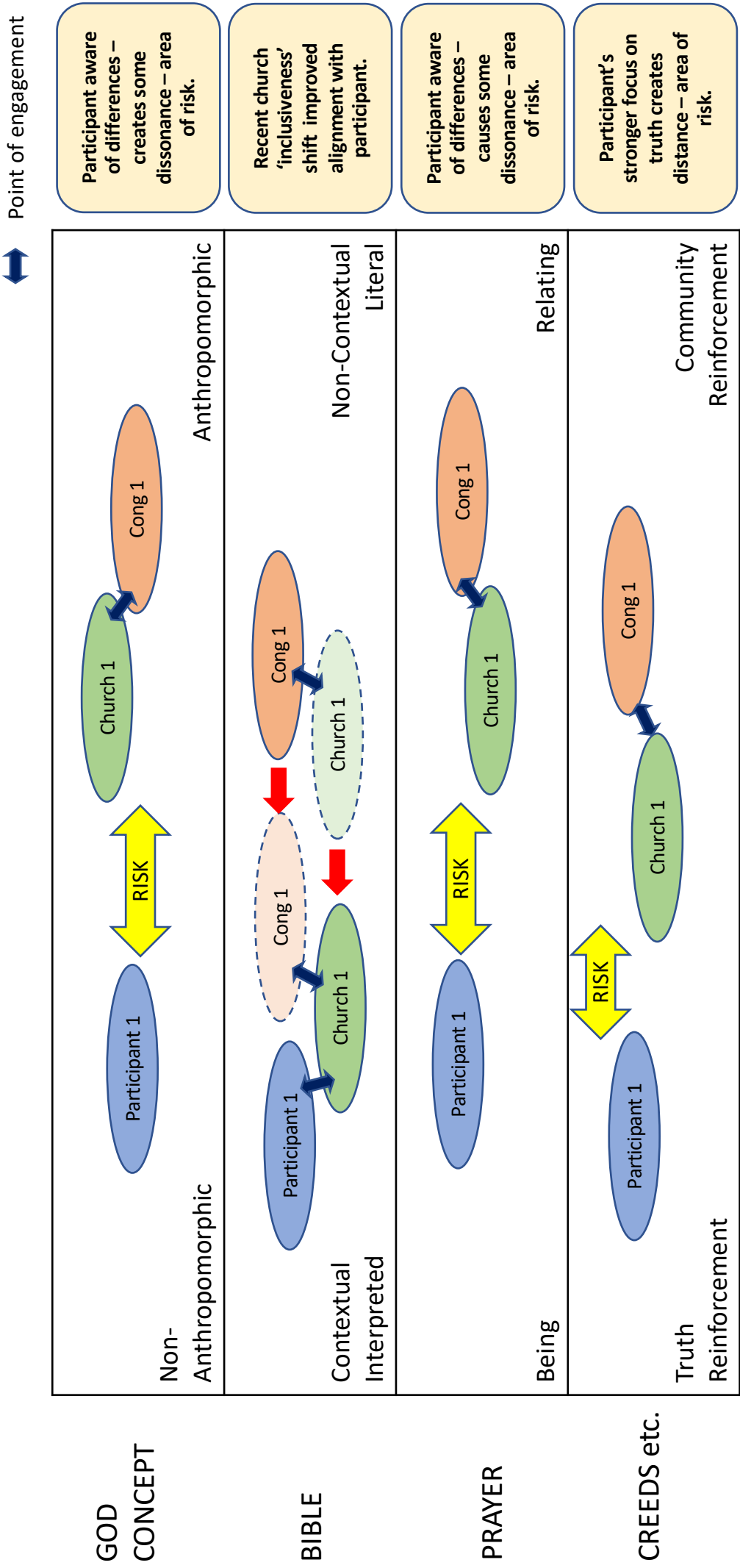
Congregation-owned system for cognitive engagement with the church through broad cognitive alignment with and assent to the presented Anglican tradition on an independently-minded basis, modified by a more ‘personal’ understanding of God and prayer.	
Customer	Neurotypical worshippers.
Actors	Church leaders. Any family or upbringing-related influencers. Personal reading – authors.
Transformation	Cognitive engagement with the church achieved by general cognitive assent to church teaching and sacred texts – although with a personal flavour.
Weltanschauung	God seen as an authority figure (rather than as a friend) - but seen as personal. Stronger emphasis (than church) on the Bible as ‘word of God’ – ‘soft literacy’ – accommodation by most of church ‘broader interpretation’. Prayer seen as more of an emotional communal process. Hymns/liturgy/creeds seen more as a communal process/celebration – not so much focus on content and its meaning – tacit acceptance of the words.
Owner	Congregation – whilst seen as broadly aligned with the church, they are seen as ‘independent-minded’.
Environment	‘Personal interpretation limits’ permitted by local church for congregation members. Desire of congregation members to ‘belong’ to the congregation.

Participant 1: Root Definition 3 – ‘Autistic Worshipper’ perspective

Autistic-worshipper-owned system for cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive alignment on an ‘inclusive’ approach to the Bible whilst maintaining a non-anthropomorphic understanding of God and accepting the resulting ‘difference’ and associated cognitive engagement risk in the experience of prayer and praxis.

Customer	Autistic worshipper.
Actors	Autistic worshipper, personal reading.
Transformation	Cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive assent to church’s approach to interpreting scripture and use of ‘anthropomorphic language’ to establish cognitive engagement with church, whilst adopting an ‘individual’ approach to thinking about key faith elements and texts.
Weltanschauung	God seen as non-personal, different from that of humanity, with interaction between God and who we are and what we think – prayer experienced as ‘being’ in the presence of God. Anthropomorphic language about God accepted as necessary to enable us to talk about God. Bible seen as a library of different types of literature – need to understand context to interpret – God’s message clearly stated, but not all ‘the word of God’. God’s truth also encapsulated in creeds, liturgies and hymns for reinforcing congregational unity. Acceptance of personal ‘difference’ arising from autism.
Owner	Autistic worshippers, who insist on making their own interpretation.
Environment	(Autistic) desire for continuity/consistency in church teaching & Tradition. (Autistic) way of rationalising/understanding spiritual realities. Church will assume the right (explicitly or implicitly) to define the limits within which any ‘personal interpretation’ is acceptable – so possible conflict.

Participant 1: Root Definition Mapping



Participant 2: Root Definition 1 – ‘Church’ perspective

Church-owned system for establishing worshipper cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive alignment with and assent to the trinitarian, theistic, Christian tradition and Nazarene core values as expressed through a ‘culturally-contextualised’ approach to Biblical interpretation with the lens of God’s love as ‘Father’.	
Customer	Church institution, congregation.
Actors	Church leaders and 'approved' laity.
Transformation	Cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive alignment with and assent to a ‘culturally-contextualised’ approach to Biblical interpretation through the lens of God’s love as ‘Father’.
Weltanschauung	Traditional trinitarian, theistic, conception of God with a strong ‘relational’ emphasis - God engages and intervenes directly with the world and his people – driven by love for His people. Bible needs to be re-interpreted in the modern cultural context through the lens of God’s love. Being and engaging with God as the People of God is important and a key part of services – liturgy and hymns reinforce the sense of ‘Christian community’.
Owner	Church institution – Nazarene - as moderated by the local church.
Environment	Faithfulness to denominational formulations of the Tradition.

Participant 2: Root Definition 2 – ‘Congregation’ perspective

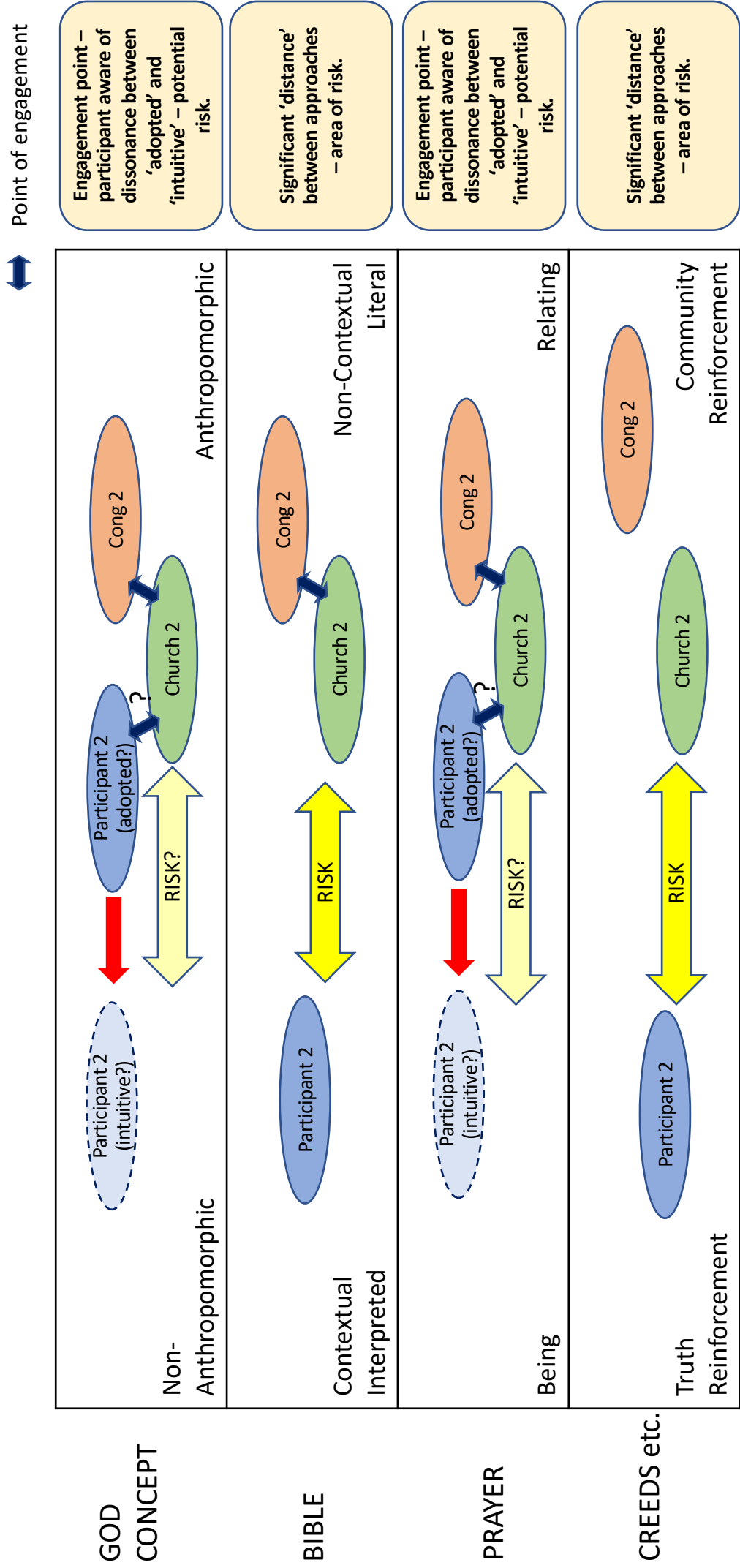
Congregation-owned system for cognitive engagement with the church through broad cognitive alignment with and assent to the presented Nazarene tradition in principle, modified by a more ‘direct and experiential’ understanding of scripture and emphasis on community.

Customer	Neurotypical worshippers.
Actors	Church leaders. Any family or upbringing-related influencers. Personal reading – authors.
Transformation	Cognitive engagement with the church achieved by broad cognitive alignment with and assent to church teaching in principle.
Weltanschauung	Attendance/membership indicative of close alignment with and endorsement of ‘formal position’ of church. Strong value placed on relational approach to God, direct ‘speaking’ of God to worshippers through scriptures and a strong sense of Christian community.
Owner	Congregation.
Environment	‘Personal interpretation limits’ permitted by local church for congregation members. Desire of congregation members to ‘belong’ to the congregation.

Participant 2: Root Definition 3 – ‘Autistic Worshipper’ perspective

Autistic-worshipper-owned system for cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive alignment with and assent to the church’s understanding of God’s relational nature whilst managing through personal reading and studying the cognitive dissonance arising as a result of maintaining a systemic, rational, approach to theological truth.	
Customer	Autistic worshipper.
Actors	Autistic worshipper, personal reading.
Transformation	Cognitive engagement with the church through the notion of a personal God, whilst pursuing logical/rational integrity in theological understanding and mitigating ‘cognitive dissonance’ through private reading.
Weltanschauung	God is the creator of everything – but ‘withdraws’ to give us space to live and respond – to find ‘him’ – God as somewhat remote. Bible as the inspired word of God – but its truth needs to be ‘contextualised’. A certain amount of cognitive dissonance is the acceptable price of engagement with the church. Personal difference is ok – “its not all about me”.
Owner	Autistic worshipper.
Environment	(Autistic) desire for continuity/consistency in church teaching & Tradition. (Autistic) way of rationalising/understanding spiritual realities. Church will assume the right (explicitly or implicitly) to define the limits within which any ‘personal interpretation’ is acceptable – so possible conflict.

Participant 2: Root Definition Mapping



GOD
CONCEPT

BIBLE

PRAYER

CREEDS etc.

Participant 3: Root Definition 1 – ‘Church’ perspective

Church-owned system for establishing worshipper cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive alignment with and assent to the sacred texts of the trinitarian, theistic, Anglican tradition.	
Customer	Church institution, congregation.
Actors	Church leaders and 'approved' laity.
Transformation	Cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive alignment with and assent to the teaching and praxis of the church.
Weltanschauung	Orthodox, trinitarian, theistic position. Bible understood according to church-tradition-based principles of interpretation to create an 'approved view'. The church has the right to provide an 'official interpretation' of the tradition's texts.
Owner	Church institution – as moderated by the local church.
Environment	Faithfulness to denominational formulations of the Tradition.

Participant 3: Root Definition 2 – ‘Congregation’ perspective

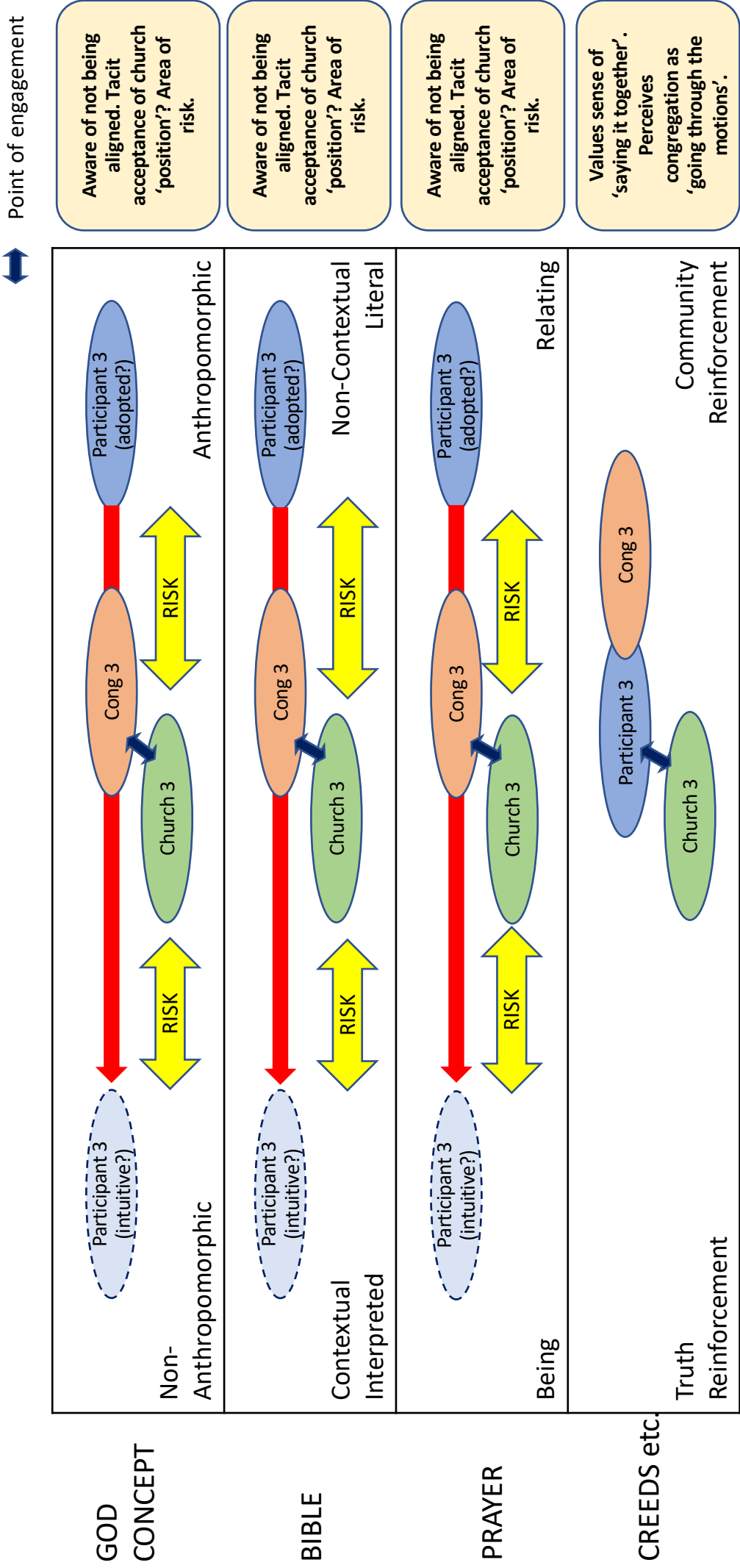
Congregation-owned system for cognitive engagement with the church through broad cognitive alignment with and assent to the presented Anglican tradition.	
Customer	Neurotypical worshippers.
Actors	Church leaders. Any family or upbringing-related influencers. Personal reading – authors.
Transformation	Cognitive engagement with the church achieved by general cognitive alignment with and assent to church teaching and sacred texts as presented.
Weltanschauung	Adoption of the ‘given’ (official church) understanding as the price of social engagement with the church.
Owner	Congregational choice to align.
Environment	Some ‘personal interpretation limits’ permitted by local church for congregation members. Desire of congregation members to ‘belong’ to the congregation.

Participant 3: Root Definition 3 – ‘Autistic Worshipper’ perspective

Autistic-worshipper-owned system for cognitive engagement with the church as a by-product from the social engagement generated by participation in the regular communal practices of the Anglican tradition (repeating creeds, liturgy and hymns) with disregard for the potential for cognitive dissonance between childhood beliefs and ‘real-world’ pragmatism.

Customer	Autistic worshipper.
Actors	Autistic worshipper, worshipper’s parents, worshipper’s school.
Transformation	Cognitive engagement with the church established only through the social engagement of participation in the regular communal practice of repeating creeds, liturgy and hymns.
Weltanschauung	Theological understanding based on ‘childhood notions’ of God as an ‘old-man’ and prayers of ‘polite formality’ – with no confidence or perceived skill to develop understanding through interpretation. A pragmatic approach to life and the application of scripture creates a ‘de facto’ interpretive framework. The resulting cognitive dissonance between the adopted ‘childhood’ approach and the recognised ‘inaccuracy’ of this view is acceptable as the price for social engagement.
Owner	Autistic worshippers operate within own ‘interpretative framework’.
Environment	Psychological association of childhood memories with safety and security?

Participant 3: Root Definition Mapping



Participant 4: Root Definition 1 – ‘Church’ perspective

Church-owned system for establishing worshipper cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive alignment with and assent to the sacred texts of the trinitarian, theistic, Anglican tradition.	
Customer	Church institution, congregation.
Actors	Church leaders and 'approved' laity.
Transformation	Cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive alignment with and assent to the teaching and praxis of the church.
Weltanschauung	Orthodox, trinitarian, theistic position. Bible understood according to church-tradition-based principles of interpretation to create an 'approved view'. The church has the right to provide an 'official interpretation' of the tradition's texts.
Owner	Church institution – as moderated by the local church.
Environment	Faithfulness to denominational formulations of the Tradition.

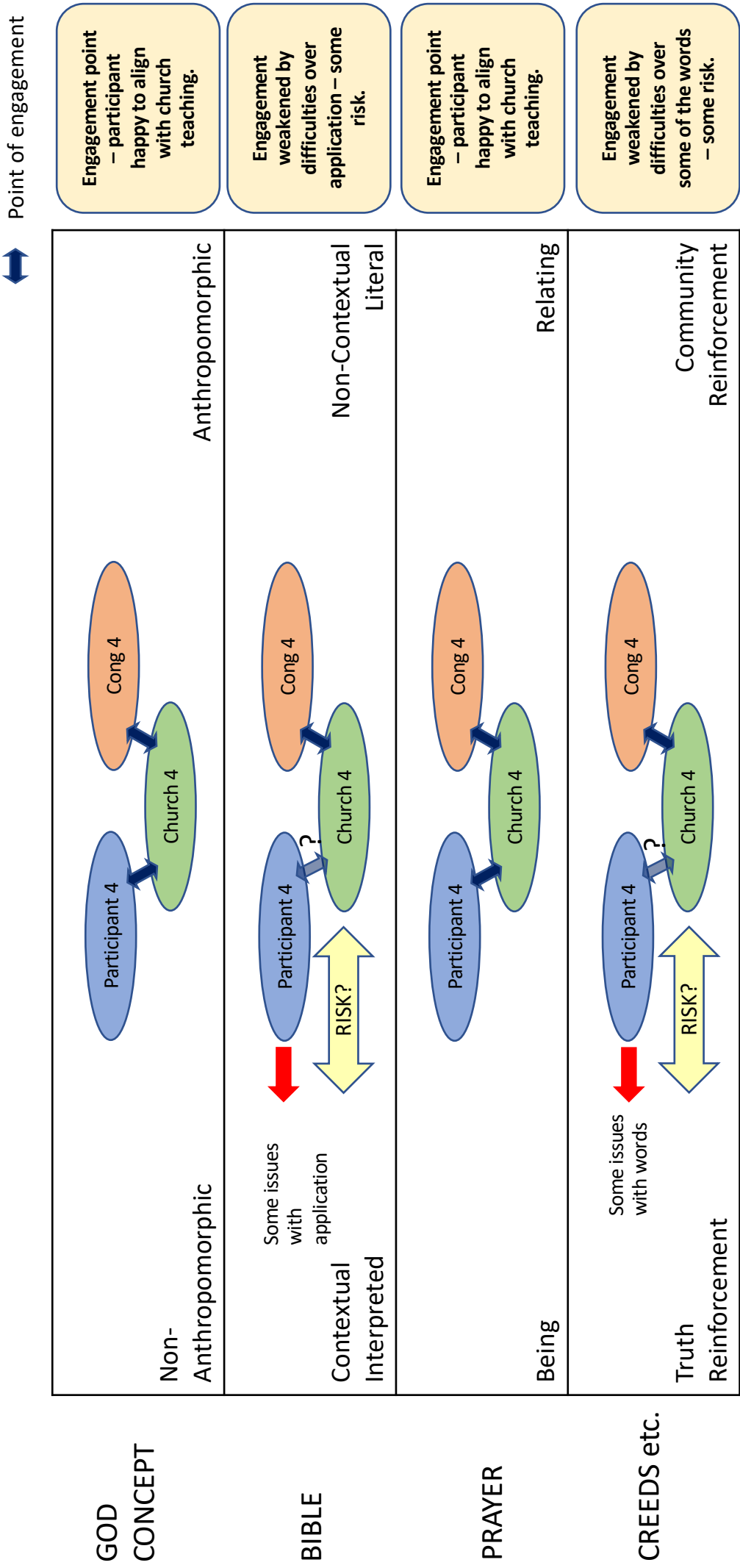
Participant 4: Root Definition 2 – ‘Congregation’ perspective

Congregation-owned system for cognitive engagement with the church through broad cognitive alignment with and assent to the presented Anglican tradition.	
Customer	Neurotypical worshippers.
Actors	Church leaders. Any family or upbringing-related influencers. Personal reading – authors
Transformation	Cognitive engagement with the church achieved by general cognitive assent to church teaching and sacred texts.
Weltanschauung	Adoption of the 'given' (official church) understanding as the price of social engagement with the church.
Owner	Congregational choice to align.
Environment	Some 'personal interpretation limits' permitted by local church for congregation members. Desire of congregation members to 'belong' to the congregation.

Participant 4: Root Definition 3 – ‘Autistic Worshipper’ perspective

Autistic-worshipper-owned system for cognitive engagement with the church through broad cognitive alignment with and assent to the presented Anglican tradition, supported by personal management of associated cognitive dissonance.	
Customer	Autistic worshipper.
Actors	Autistic worshipper, worshipper’s parents, worshipper’s school, worshipper’s churches.
Transformation	Cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive assent to church’s teaching and tradition supported by personal management of associated cognitive dissonance.
Weltanschauung	The church’s articulation of the Christian tradition is acceptable. Applying the Bible in practice brings additional challenges for autistic worshippers when this involves an area of social behaviour. It is ‘up to me’ to adapt, not the church.
Owner	Autistic worshippers insist on making their own interpretation and asking questions.
Environment	(Autistic) desire for continuity/consistency – church teaching & Tradition. Autism-related challenges in working out how to apply truths – especially truths relating to inter-personal/social interactions (e.g. showing kindness) – seeking appropriate ‘rules’. church will assume the right (explicitly or implicitly) to define the limits within which any ‘personal interpretation’ is acceptable – so possible conflict.

Participant 4: Root Definition Mapping



Point of engagement

Engagement point – participant happy to align with church teaching.

Engagement weakened by difficulties over application – some risk.

Engagement point – participant happy to align with church teaching.

Engagement weakened by difficulties over some of the words – some risk.

GOD
CONCEPT

BIBLE

PRAYER

CREEDS etc.

Participant 5: Root Definition 1 – ‘Church’ perspective

Church-owned system for establishing worshipper cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive alignment with and assent to the sacred texts of the trinitarian, theistic, Methodist tradition adopting a ‘soft-literal’ approach to the Bible and emphasising the ‘Fatherhood of God’, strong community and heart for the poor.	
Customer	Church institution. congregation.
Actors	Church leaders and 'approved' laity.
Transformation	Cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive alignment with and assent to the teaching, values and practice of the Methodist tradition.
Weltanschauung	God presented in 'theistic' terms – somewhat paternal – with heart for the poor and community. Bible seen from a conservative/pseudo-fundamentalist perspective – but open to latent sexism, homophobia etc.. Public prayer and 'practice' seek to engage with God in an anthropomorphic manner as a means of strengthening the 'community bond'.
Owner	Church institution – as moderated by the local church.
Environment	Faithfulness to denominational formulations of the Tradition.

Participant 5: Root Definition 2 – ‘Congregation’ perspective

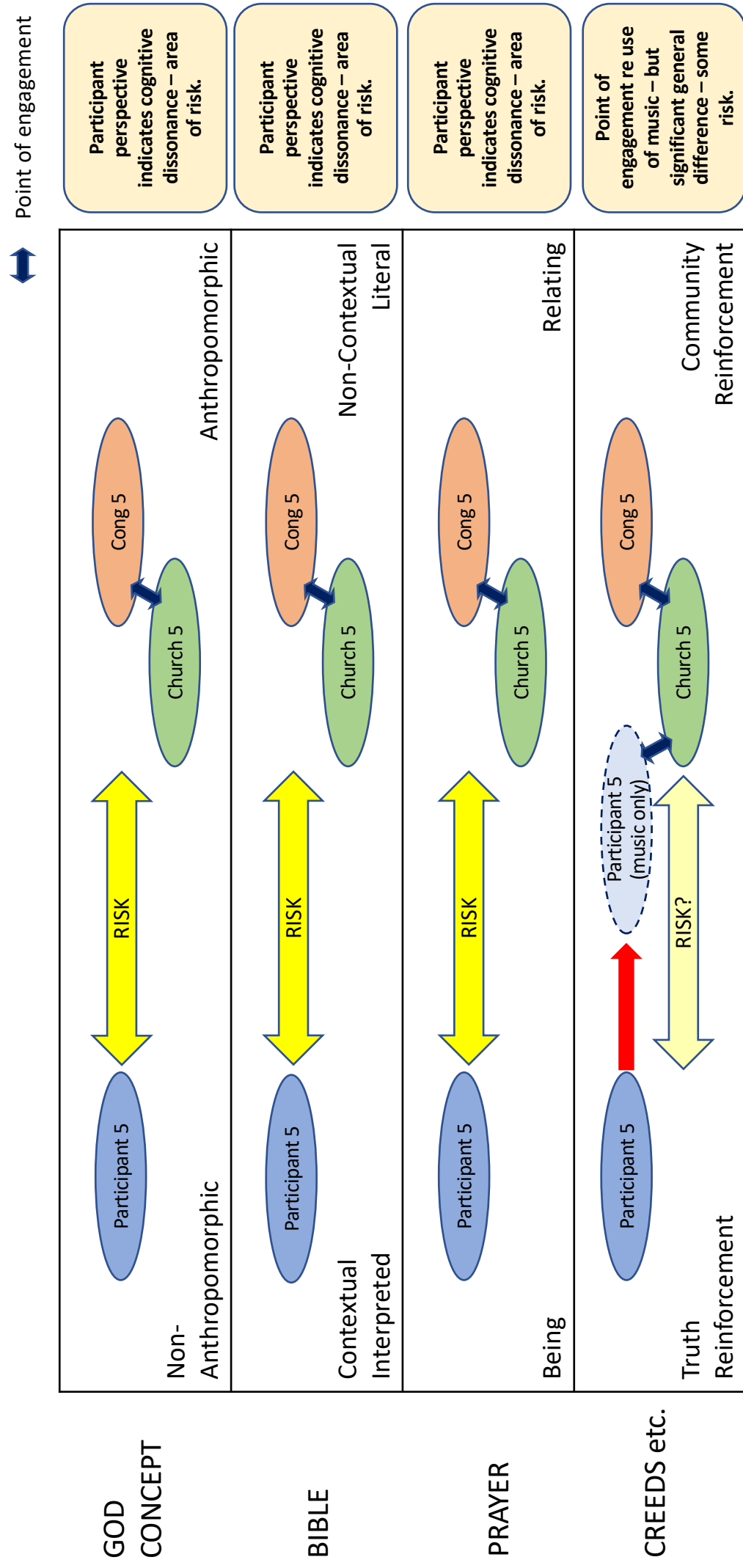
Congregation-owned system for cognitive engagement with the church through unquestioning cognitive alignment with and assent to the presented Methodist tradition, with a particularly strong emphasis on community.	
Customer	Neurotypical worshippers.
Actors	Church leaders. Any family or upbringing-related influencers. Personal reading – authors.
Transformation	Cognitive engagement with the church achieved by unquestioning cognitive assent to church teaching and sacred texts – with emphasis on the value of community.
Weltanschauung	Teaching of church broadly accepted as offered – church responsible for defining ‘truth’ – God as paternal and prayer as conscious engagement with God – in a somewhat passive stance in regards responsibility. Shared participation in worship – especially singing – creates/strengthens community bond of ‘belonging’.
Owner	Congregational choice to align.
Environment	‘Personal interpretation limits’ permitted by local church for congregation members. Desire of congregation members to ‘belong’ to the congregation.

Participant 5: Root Definition 3 – ‘Autistic Worshipper’ perspective

Autistic-worshipper-owned system for cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive alignment with and assent to church values of community and “Love God – Love Neighbour” – particularly as expressed through communal music-based worship, whilst accepting/managing the cognitive engagement risk involved in maintaining a non-anthropomorphic conceptualisation of God.

Customer	Autistic worshipper.
Actors	Autistic worshipper, worshipper’s parents, worshipper’s churches.
Transformation	Cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive assent to church values of community and “Love God – Love Neighbour” – particularly as expressed by the communal involvement in music-based worship.
Weltanschauung	Non-anthropomorphic concept of God – more the 'underlying and sustaining reality' behind everything. Our 'interaction' with God is more an 'engagement' with 'who we are' – 'being in God' – conscious/unconscious, cognitive/emotional – more individual/private than communal. Scripture and other 'texts' similarly 'inspired' (prompted?) by God, but crafted by humans – need to be interpreted contextually and through generic principle of 'Love God - Love Neighbour' – what's best for the community? Shared values with the church on this make it worth accepting the risk of lack of wider cognitive engagement.
Owner	Autistic worshippers insist on making their own interpretation and asking questions.
Environment	(Autistic) desire for continuity/consistency. church will assume the right (explicitly or implicitly) to define the limits within which any 'personal interpretation' is acceptable – so possible conflict.

Participant 5: Root Definition Mapping



Participant 6: Root Definition 1 – ‘Church’ perspective

Church-owned system for establishing worshipper cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive alignment with and assent to the sacred texts of the trinitarian, theistic, Methodist tradition emphasising the human incarnation of Jesus.	
Customer	Church institution. congregation.
Actors	Church leaders and 'approved' laity.
Transformation	Cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive alignment with and assent to the teaching, values and practices of the Methodist tradition.
Weltanschauung	Traditional perspective: God presented in broadly 'theistic', 'trinitarian' terms – with Jesus providing a 'human incarnation' – the Bible is authoritative, but needs appropriate interpretation. Prayer both moves the hand of God and transforms the congregation, whilst hymn singing strengthens both understanding and community.
Owner	Church institution – as moderated by the local church.
Environment	Faithfulness to denominational formulations of the Tradition.

Participant 6: Root Definition 2 – ‘Congregation’ perspective

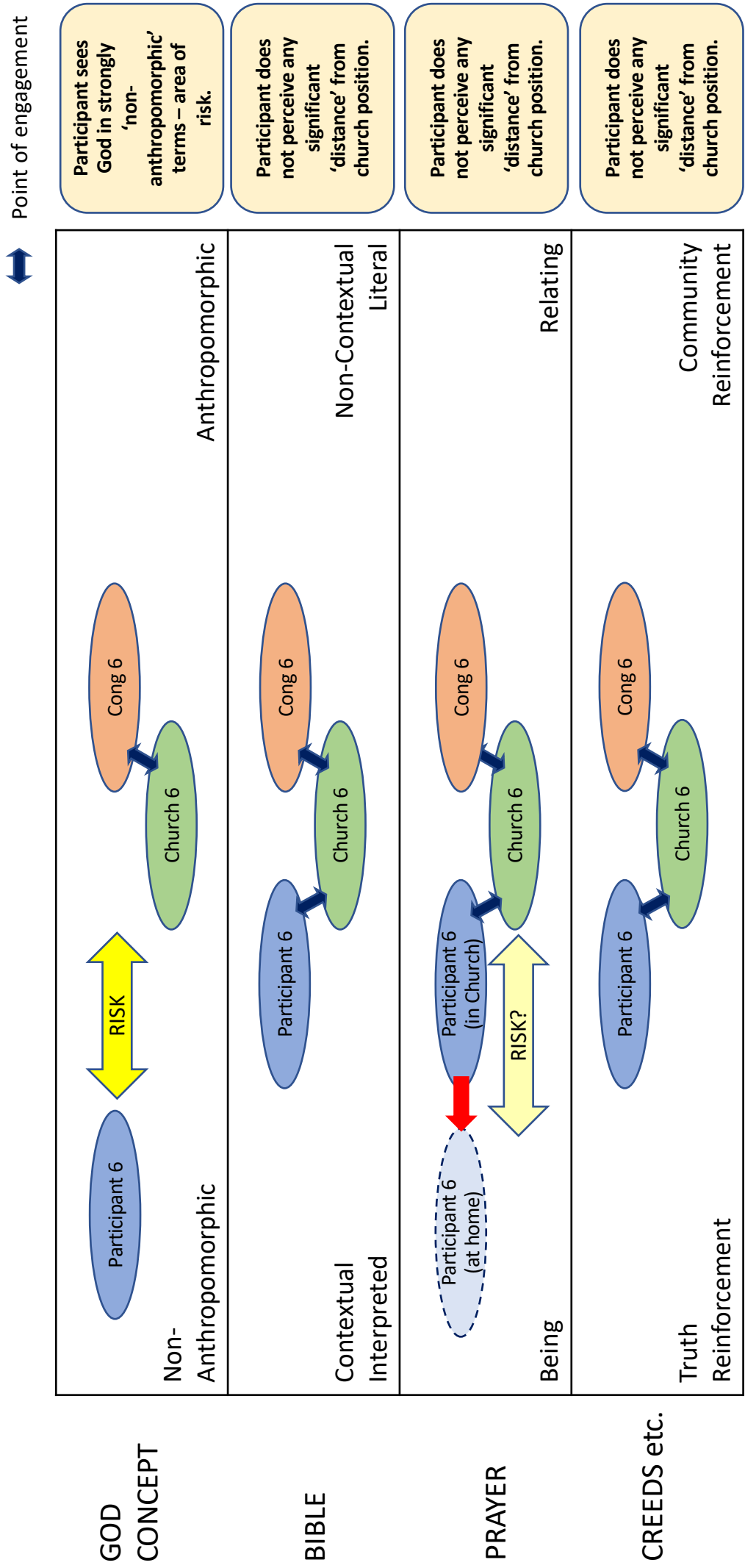
Congregation-owned system for cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive alignment with and assent to the presented Methodist tradition, with a somewhat legalistic approach to the application of scripture.	
Customer	Neurotypical worshippers.
Actors	Church leaders. Any family or upbringing-related influencers. Personal education and reading – authors.
Transformation	Cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive alignment with and assent to the presented Methodist tradition, with a somewhat legalistic approach to the application of scripture.
Weltanschauung	Acceptance of the church's teaching, but translated into a fixed set of practical traditions and expectations of how services are run.
Owner	Congregation's choice to align with church.
Environment	'Personal interpretation limits' permitted by local church for congregation members. Desire of congregation members to 'belong' to the congregation.

Participant 6: Root Definition 3 – ‘Autistic Worshipper’ perspective

Autistic-worshipper-owned system for cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive alignment with and assent to the church's value of community and tacit cognitive assent to church teaching and practice, whilst maintaining a non-anthropomorphic concept of God and an independent approach to the interpretation of scripture, with the associated cognitive engagement risk being accepted.

Customer	Autistic worshipper.
Actors	Autistic worshipper, worshipper's parents, worshipper's school, worshipper's churches.
Transformation	Cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive alignment with and assent to church value of community and tacit cognitive assent to church teaching and practice.
Weltanschauung	God seen as a power – energy with no human form – and the source of love but capable of interaction (through prayer) and relationship with humans through which we are changed. The Bible is to be interpreted through that lens of 'God is love' and a prioritising of what Jesus said and did - whilst other components can be 'discarded' if they clash with our culture ("St Peter was a misogynist"). Singing hymns provides a good point of engagement – from both a 'communal' and a 'truth' perspective. As an autistic person, it is important to identify what I am able to do/contribute that is an expression of this Christian love in practice. Welcoming and friendly are key characteristics of a good church.
Owner	Autistic worshippers insist on making their own interpretation and asking questions.
Environment	Friendliness is an important feature of a church in which autistic people are able to feel accepted and able to contribute.

Participant 6: Root Definition Mapping



Participant 7: Root Definition 1 – ‘Church’ perspective

Church-owned system for establishing worshipper cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive alignment with and assent to the sacred texts and practices of the trinitarian, theistic, Catholic tradition.	
Customer	Church institution, congregation.
Actors	Church leaders and 'approved' laity.
Transformation	Cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive assent to the teaching and tradition of the church.
Weltanschauung	Trinitarian view of God at the heart of understanding – with the mystery of love as its core and the possibility of personal relationship with humans through prayer. The Bible, though flawed through human frailty and error and needing interpretation, reliably communicates the key message of the Gospel of Christ – which is then condensed and systematised in the Creeds and reinforced, both in message and community in the liturgies and hymns of the Tradition. The (Catholic) Church is seen as the custodian of the Christian tradition.
Owner	Church institution – with very limited moderation by the local church.
Environment	Faithfulness to denominational formulations of the Tradition.

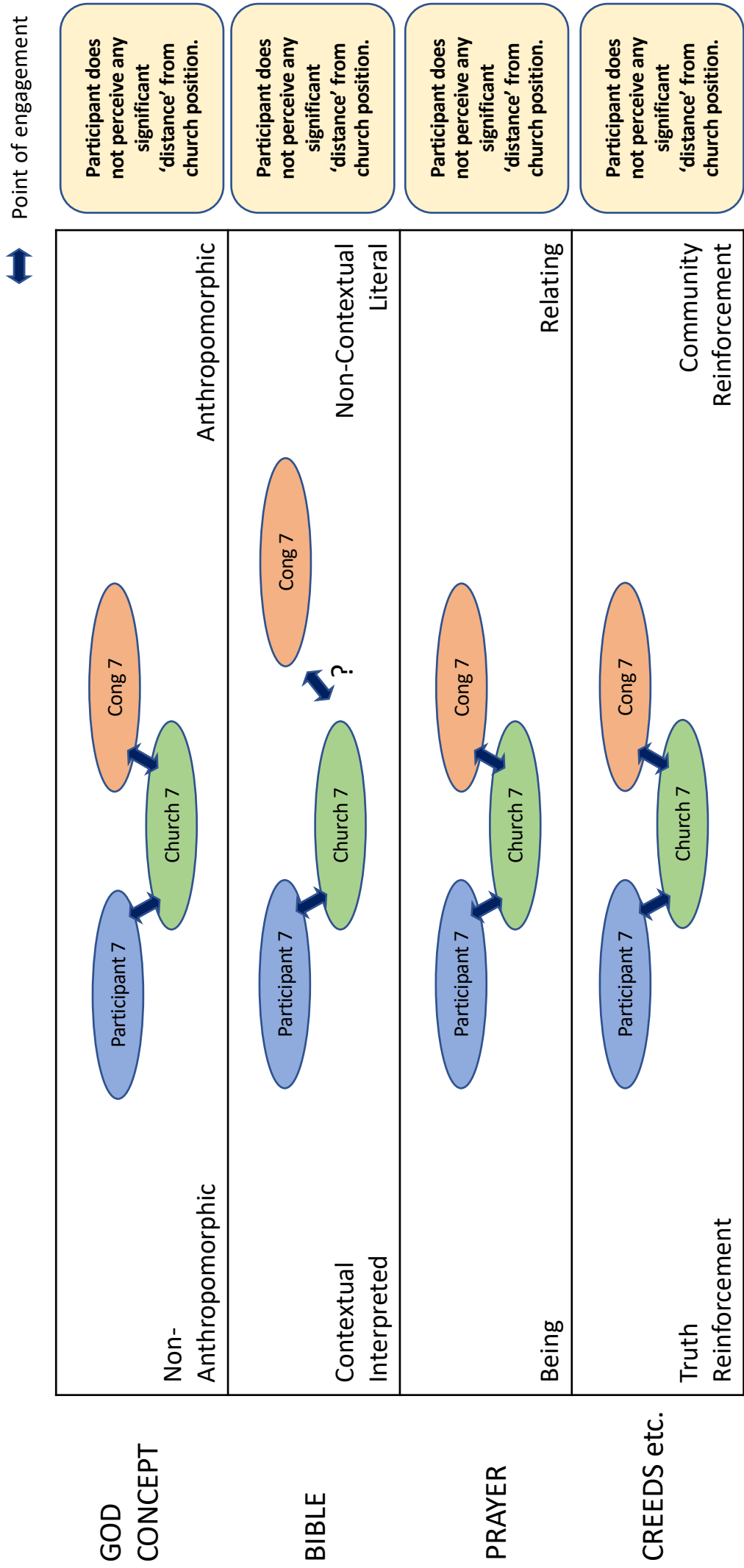
Participant 7: Root Definition 2 – ‘Congregation’ perspective

Congregation-owned system for cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive alignment with and assent to the presented Catholic tradition – as understood on the basis of ‘personalised interpretation’.	
Customer	Neurotypical worshippers.
Actors	Church leaders. Any family or upbringing-related influencers.
Transformation	Cognitive engagement with the church achieved by general cognitive assent to church teaching and sacred texts – supported by personal interpretation.
Weltanschauung	The (Catholic) Church seen as the ‘holder of tradition’ in the Christian faith. Selective adoption of ‘personal favourite’ elements of the Bible which ‘speak’ to individuals, aligned with acknowledgement of ‘core truths’ condensed and systematised in the creeds and reinforced, both in message and community in the liturgies and hymns of the Tradition.
Owner	Congregation - individual worshippers choose to align with the church, but modify and adopt church teaching to align with personal preferences.
Environment	Limited theological understanding leads to a more ‘direct’ reading of the Bible.

Participant 7: Root Definition 3 – ‘Autistic Worshipper’ perspective

Autistic-worshipper-owned system for cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive alignment with and assent to the presented Catholic tradition with the risk of cognitive dissonance mitigated through theological training.	
Customer	Autistic worshipper.
Actors	Autistic worshipper, worshipper’s parents, worshipper’s school, worshipper’s churches.
Transformation	Cognitive engagement with the church and with the Triune God through the cognitive alignment with and assent to the sacred texts and traditions of the (Catholic) Church – with supporting context provided by theological training.
Weltanschauung	The (Catholic) Church seen as the ‘holder of tradition’ in the Christian faith. Framework for interpretation provided through theological training. The trinitarian view of God at the heart of understanding – with the mystery of love as its core and the possibility of personal relationship with humans through prayer. The Bible, though flawed through human frailty and error and needing interpretation, reliably communicates the key message of the Gospel of Christ – which is then condensed and systematised in the creeds and reinforced, both in message and community, in the liturgies and hymns of the Tradition.
Owner	Autistic worshipper – able to align with church with the support of theological training.
Environment	(Autistic) desire for continuity/consistency. Theological training helped provide context for interpretation.

Participant 7: Root Definition Mapping



Participant 7

Church 7

Cong 7

Truth Reinforcement

Community Reinforcement

Participant does not perceive any significant 'distance' from church position.

Participant does not perceive any significant 'distance' from church position.

Participant does not perceive any significant 'distance' from church position.

Participant does not perceive any significant 'distance' from church position.

Point of engagement

GOD
CONCEPT

BIBLE

PRAYER

CREEDS etc.

Participant 8: Root Definition 1 – ‘Church’ perspective

Church-owned system for establishing worshipper cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive alignment with and assent to the Biblical understanding of the trinitarian, theistic, Baptist tradition, with a ‘charismatic’ emphasis on evangelical interpretation of scripture and the personal experience of being ‘led by the Holy Spirit’.

Customer	Church institution. Congregation.
Actors	Church leaders and 'approved' laity.
Transformation	Cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive alignment with and assent to the teaching and practice of the church, as interpreted from a charismatic, spirit-led, perspective.
Weltanschauung	God presented in 'theistic' terms in line with a trinitarian view. God is actively building his people as a community – faith is relational and corporate prayer and worship are about building a relationship with, and expectation of, God through the Holy Spirit.
Owner	Church institution – as moderated by the local church.
Environment	Openness to charismatic gifts.

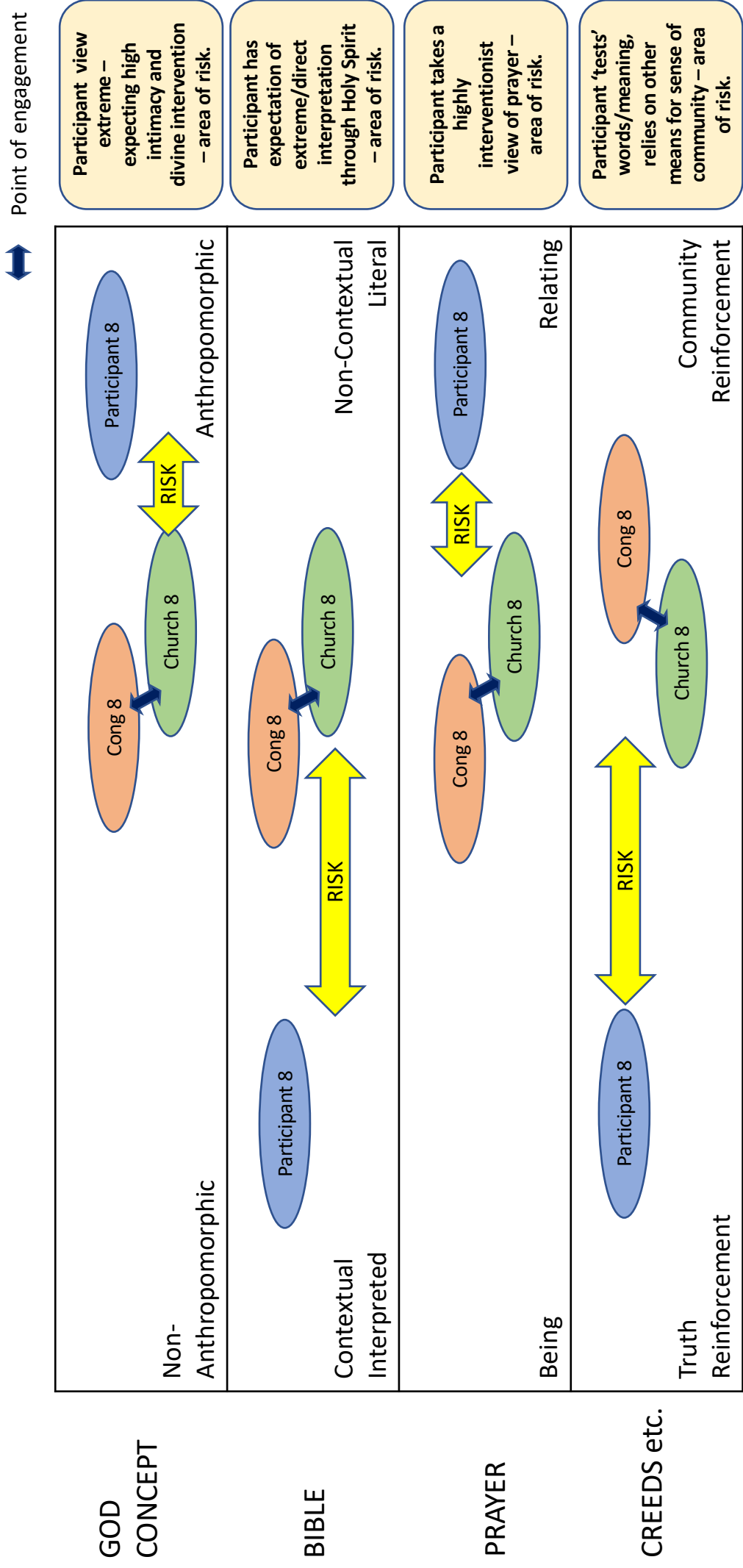
Participant 8: Root Definition 2 – ‘Congregation’ perspective

Congregation-owned system for cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive alignment with and assent to the presented Baptist tradition and interpretation of scripture, supported by some experience of the gifts of the Holy Spirit.	
Customer	Neurotypical worshippers.
Actors	Church leaders. Any family or upbringing-related influencers. Personal reading – authors
Transformation	Cognitive engagement with the church achieved by general cognitive assent to church teaching, supported by some experience of the gifts of the Holy Spirit.
Weltanschauung	Support for church ‘position’. Perhaps a dualistic perception, in which the details of real life are not so much affected by the reality and presence of God.
Owner	Congregation.
Environment	‘Pressure and practicalities of daily life constrain both extent and nature of engagement for many’.

Participant 8: Root Definition 3 – ‘Autistic Worshipper’ perspective

Autistic-worshipper-owned system for cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive alignment with and assent to the church values and expectation of direct personal experience of the Holy Spirit – with cognitive engagement risk mitigated through the compensating social and sensory engagement resulting from this ‘direct experience’ of God.	
Customer	Autistic worshipper.
Actors	Autistic worshipper, worshipper’s churches, Holy Spirit.
Transformation	Cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive alignment with and assent to the church values and expectation which anticipate direct personal experience of the Holy Spirit – with cognitive engagement risk mitigated through compensating social and sensory engagement resulting from ‘direct experience’ of God.
Weltanschauung	Strongly personal, relational and theistic concept of God – very interventionist. God is completely trustworthy. Truth of scripture and liturgy is dynamic and is interpreted and mediated in ‘real-time’ by the Holy Spirit. Also, scripture is to be interpreted ‘as a whole’, rather than taking a verse in isolation.
Owner	Autistic worshipper.
Environment	Linkage with Jewish background (Messianic Believer). Believer’s experience of homelessness and poverty and the perceived ‘miraculous interventions’ of God also help shape the approach.

Participant 8: Root Definition Mapping



Participant 9: Root Definition 1 – ‘Church’ perspective

Church-owned system for establishing worshipper cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive alignment with and assent to the Biblical text as interpreted within the trinitarian, theistic, Reformed tradition, including an emphasis on the personal nature of God.	
Customer	Church institution, congregation.
Actors	Church leaders and 'approved' laity.
Transformation	Cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive assent to the expository preaching and home-group discussion.
Weltanschauung	Holding a traditional 'reformed' position, supporting a trinitarian, theistic, view of God, but with an emphasis on the 'relational' aspects of God and a 'sola scriptura' approach to the Bible.
Owner	Church institution – as moderated by the local church.
Environment	Faithfulness to denominational formulations of the Tradition.

Participant 9: Root Definition 2 – ‘Congregation’ perspective

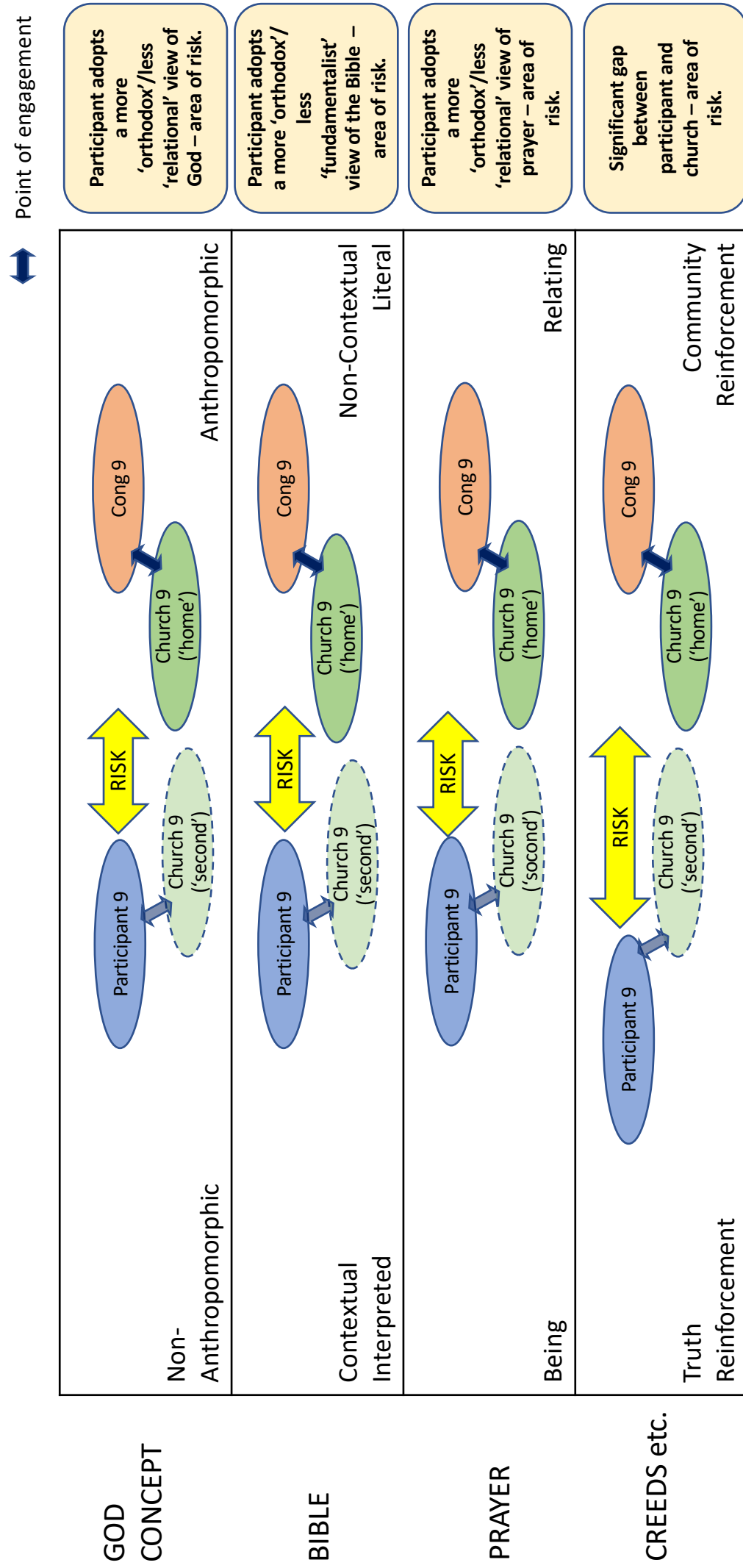
Congregation-owned system for cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive alignment with and assent to the presented Reformed understanding of scripture, interpreted and applied within a personal context.	
Customer	Neurotypical worshippers.
Actors	Church leaders. Any family or upbringing-related influencers. Personal reading – authors.
Transformation	Cognitive engagement with the church achieved by cognitive assent to church teaching – personally interpreted and applied.
Weltanschauung	Accepting the church's position on the scriptures, with the additional ‘filter’ of interpretation from a personal, and emotional, perspective – seeing God as very relational. Songs seen as providing community bonding in the presence of God.
Owner	Congregation assume the right to ‘interpret’ the church’s view of scripture within their own context/experience.
Environment	Strongly held views of church mean that ‘public’ membership ‘compliance’ with the church position is strong.

Participant 9: Root Definition 3 – ‘Autistic Worshipper’ perspective

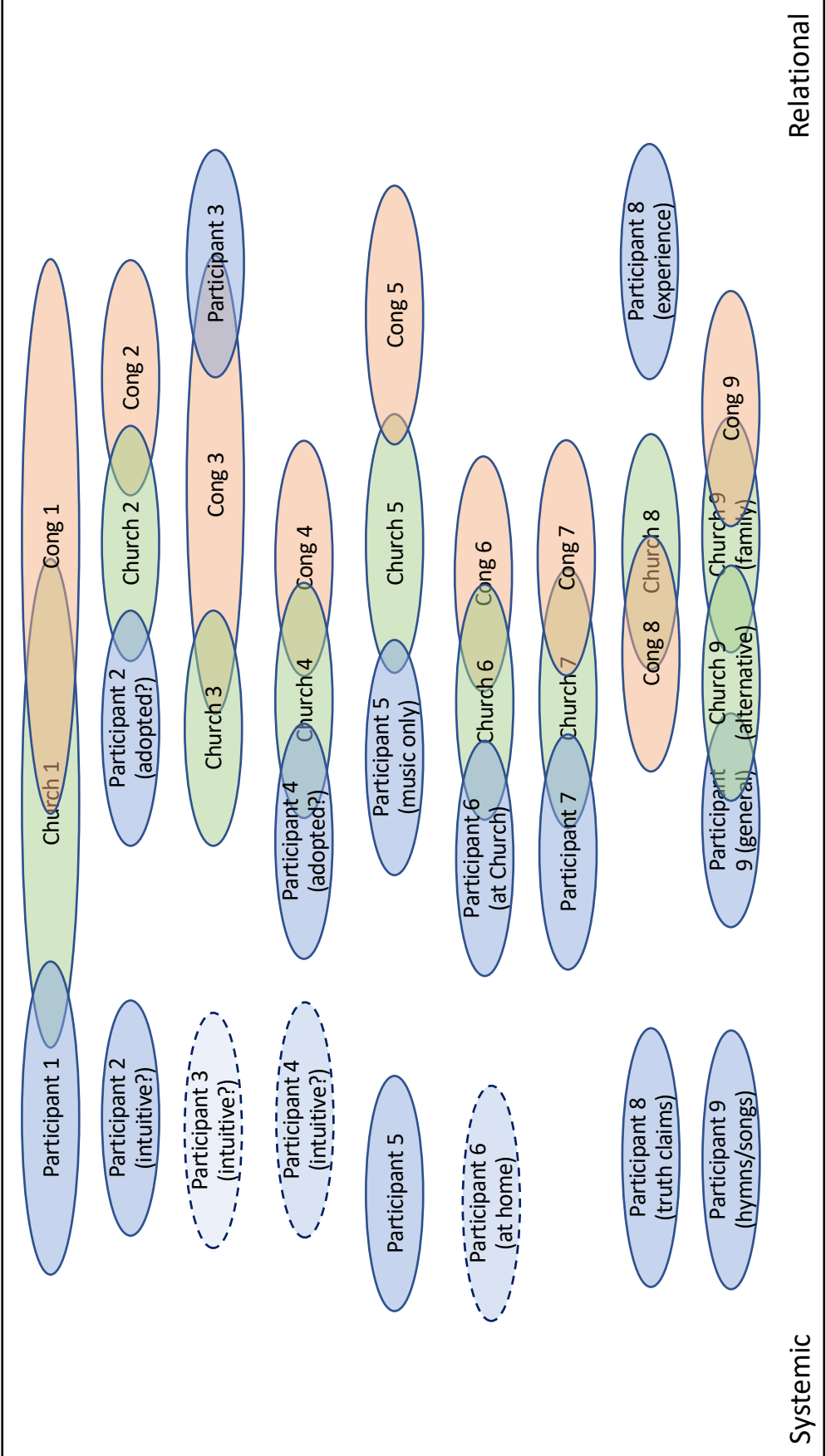
Autistic-worshipper-owned system for cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive alignment and assent to the teaching and praxis of the trinitarian, theistic, Anglo-Catholic tradition as a ‘second church’, mitigating the cognitive engagement risk associated with the ‘home church’, which is engaged with socially for family reasons.

Customer	Autistic worshipper.
Actors	Autistic worshipper, worshipper’s churches, worshipper’s reading.
Transformation	Cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive assent to the teaching and praxis of the Anglo-Catholic tradition in secondary church in order to mitigate the cognitive engagement risk at the ‘home church’.
Weltanschauung	Theistic, trinitarian, view of God – an orthodox approach to the interpretation of the scripture. Sees prayer as simply a matter of obedience, rather than a relationship and sees hymns as being primarily about meaning. Belief that worshipping together as a family is important.
Owner	Autistic worshipper.
Environment	(Autistic) desire for continuity/consistency – and also for family worship, background in Orthodox & Anglo-Catholic context.

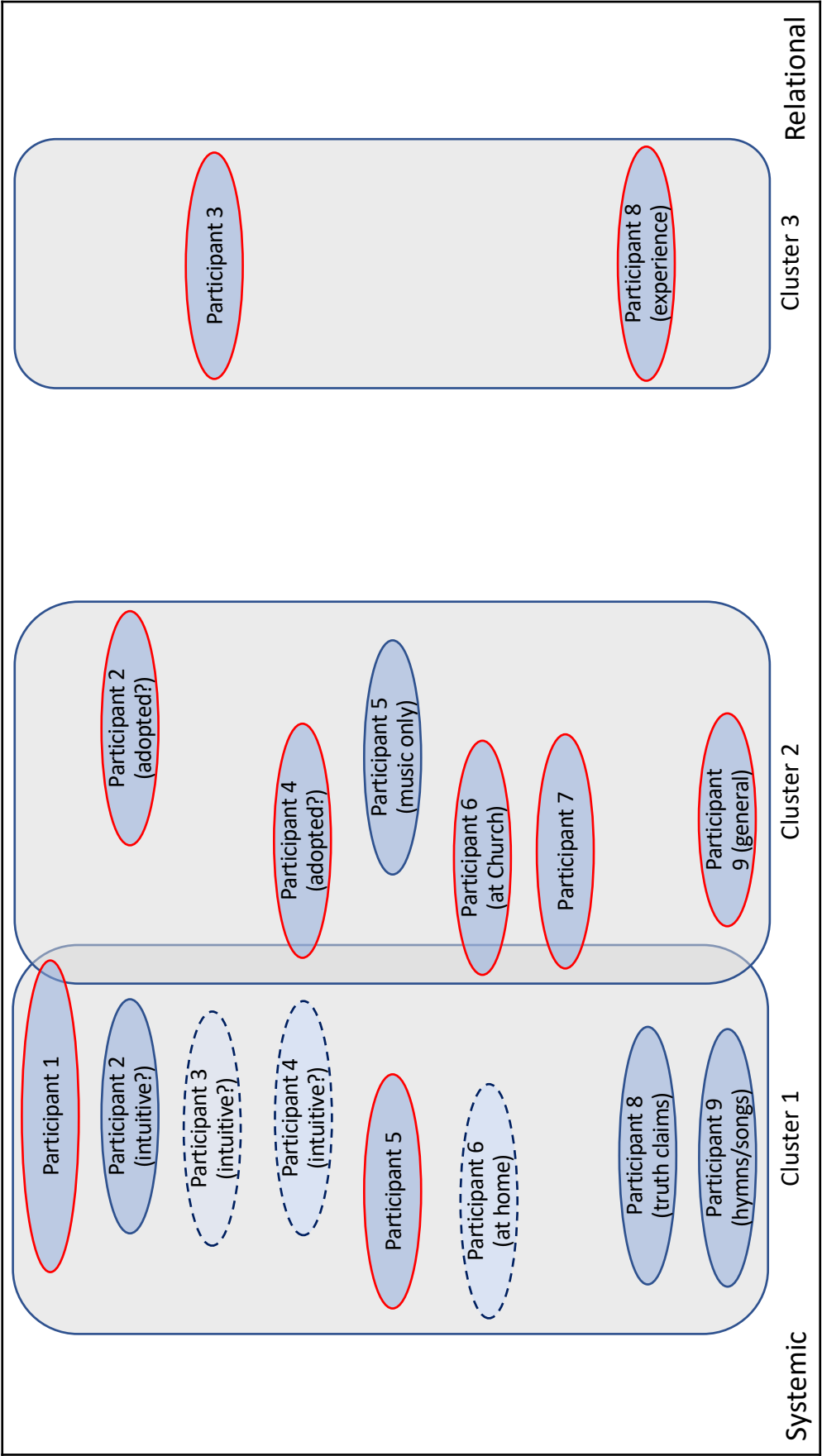
Participant 9: Root Definition Mapping



Summary Root Definition Mapping – 1 (All RDs)



Summary Root Definition Mapping – 2 (Autistic Worshipper RDs)



Cluster 1: Root Definition (Autistic Worshipper – Systemic)

AUTISTIC WORSHIPPER – DEFINING RDs	
1	Autistic-worshipper-owned system for cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive alignment with an ‘inclusive’ approach to the Bible whilst maintaining a non-anthropomorphic understanding of God and accepting the resulting ‘difference’ and associated cognitive engagement risk in the experience of prayer and praxis.
5	Autistic-worshipper-owned system for cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive alignment with and assent to church values of community and “Love God – Love Neighbour” – particularly as expressed through communal music-based worship, whilst accepting/managing the cognitive engagement risk involved in maintaining a non-anthropomorphic conceptualisation of God.

Common themes

Autistic-worshipper-owned system for cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive alignment with and assent to church values, whilst maintaining an individual non-anthropomorphic God concept, sustaining engagement with the church on a non-cognitive (social) basis and accepting/managing the resulting cognitive engagement risk through a personal plan.	
C	Autistic worshippers.
A	Autistic worshippers, personal reading, ‘other services’.
T	Establishing cognitive engagement through alignment with and assent to church values. Accepting the cognitive engagement risk.
W	Non-anthropomorphic God concept. Highly-systemic approach to ‘sacred and faith tradition texts’ requiring high levels of contextual interpretation in order to sustain relevance/coherence. Achieving systemic coherence and lack of cognitive dissonance is a higher priority than cognitive engagement (creating/maintaining).
O	Autistic Worshippers.
E	Engagement with the church can be sustained on a non-cognitive basis (e.g. on a social basis). The non-anthropomorphic concept of God is developed and nourished through activities outside the church.

Cluster 2: Root Definition (Autistic Worshipper – Orthodox)

AUTISTIC WORSHIPPER – DEFINING RDs	
2	Autistic-worshipper-owned system for cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive alignment with and assent to the church's understanding of God's relational nature whilst managing through personal reading and studying the cognitive dissonance arising as a result of maintaining a systemic, rational, approach to theological truth.
4	Autistic-worshipper-owned system for cognitive engagement with the church through broad cognitive alignment with and assent to the presented Anglican tradition, supported by personal management of associated cognitive dissonance.
6	Autistic-worshipper-owned system for cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive alignment with and assent to the church's value of community and tacit cognitive assent to church teaching and practice, whilst maintaining a non-anthropomorphic concept of God and an independent approach to the interpretation of scripture, with the associated cognitive engagement risk being accepted.
7	Autistic-worshipper-owned system for cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive alignment with and assent to the presented Catholic tradition with the risk of cognitive dissonance mitigated through theological training.
9	Autistic-worshipper-owned system for cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive alignment and assent to the teaching and praxis of the trinitarian, theistic, Anglo-Catholic tradition as a 'second church', mitigating the cognitive engagement risk associated with the 'home church', which is engaged with socially for family reasons.



Autistic-worshipper-owned system for cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive alignment and assent offered at a superficial level to the church's trinitarian, theistic, concept of God and associated sacred texts whilst accepting and managing the consequential cognitive dissonance created between this 'adopted' and their 'intuitive' (Systemic) positions.	
C	Autistic worshippers.
A	Autistic worshippers, church teaching.
T	Cognitive engagement with church sustained at a 'superficial level' to supplement social engagement.
W	Church articulation of 'faith tradition texts' uses anthropomorphic/personalised language for convenience – this is not the reality. Cognitive engagement seen as a priority over the resolution of cognitive dissonance.
O	Autistic worshippers.
E	Utilisation of 'personalised measures' to manage cognitive dissonance (selective attendance, reading, theological training, attendance at alternative services elsewhere etc..).

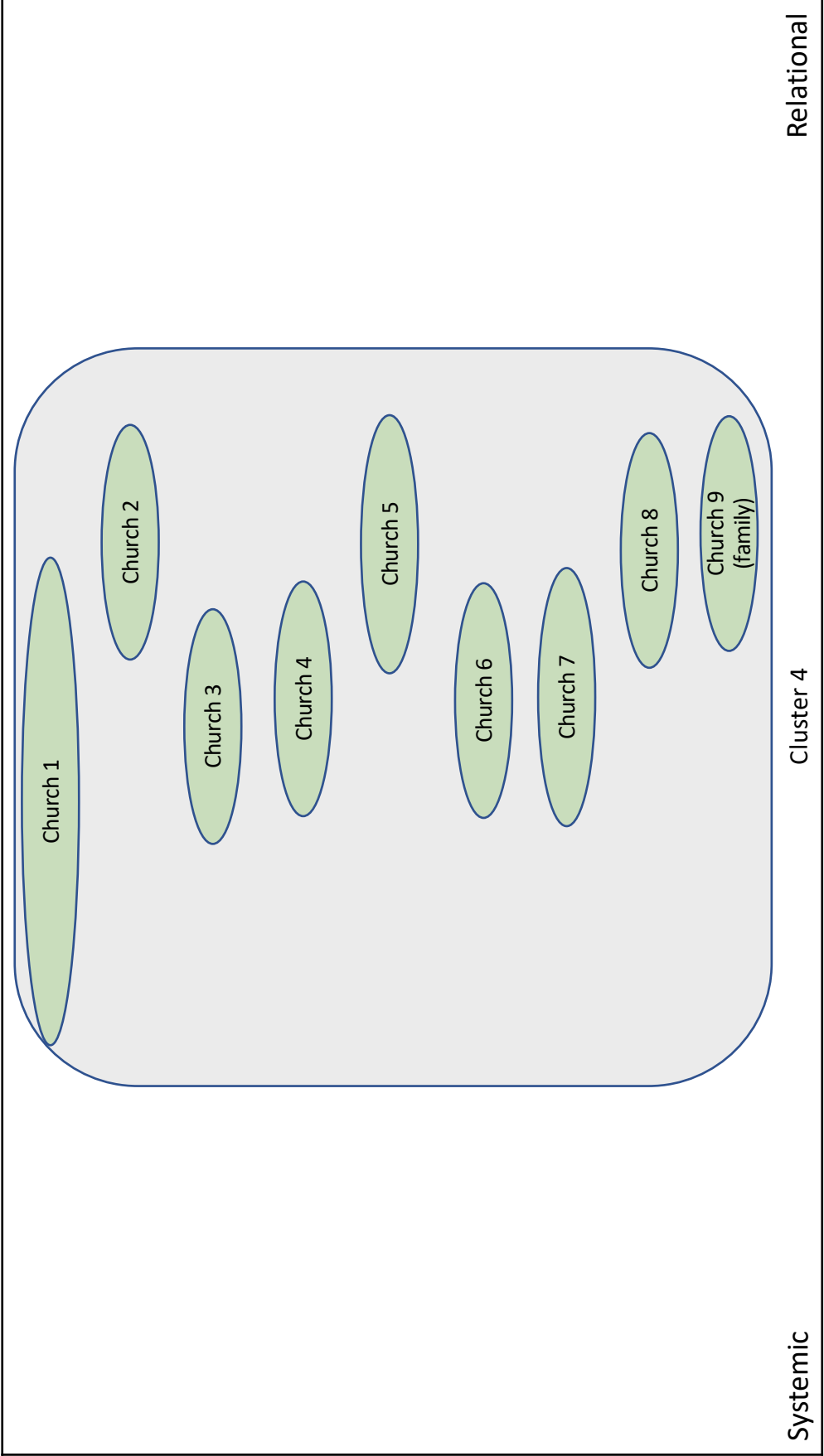
Cluster 3: Root Definition (Autistic Worshipper – Relational)

AUTISTIC WORSHIPPER - RELATIONAL	
3	Autistic-worshipper-owned system for cognitive engagement with the church as a by-product from the social engagement generated by participation in the regular communal practices of the Anglican tradition (repeating creeds, liturgy and hymns) with disregard for the potential for cognitive dissonance between childhood beliefs and 'real-world' pragmatism.
8	Autistic-worshipper-owned system for cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive alignment with and assent to the church values and expectation of direct personal experience of the Holy Spirit – with cognitive engagement risk mitigated through the compensating social and sensory engagement resulting from this 'direct experience' of God.

Common themes

Autistic-Worshipper-system for establishing engagement with the church on a social basis whilst managing cognitive distance and avoiding cognitive dissonance by engaging with the church's sacred texts on a direct, 'externally sanctioned', basis.	
C	Autistic worshippers.
A	Autistic worshippers, 'Authoritative voices' (e.g. of childhood explanations of God or of the Holy Spirit).
T	Engagement with the church on a social basis with risk of cognitive dissonance avoided through trust in 'external authority'.
W	Church 'faith tradition texts' seen through a very direct, 'face-value', lens. Validity of this 'simple' perspective maintained by commitment to the view that deviation represents danger (e.g. disobedience of the Holy Spirit or the risk of inaccurate interpretation).
O	Autistic worshippers.
E	The presence of 'third-party' influences and constrains 'worshipper's' freedom of (cognitive) action'.

Summary Root Definition Mapping – 2 (Church RDs)



CLUSTER 4
- Churches -
Emphasis on alignment with historical tradition of trinitarian, theistic, orthodoxy – sometimes with an emphasis on the ‘relational’ aspects of the tradition made possible through the incarnation of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit.

Cluster 4: Root Definition (Churches)

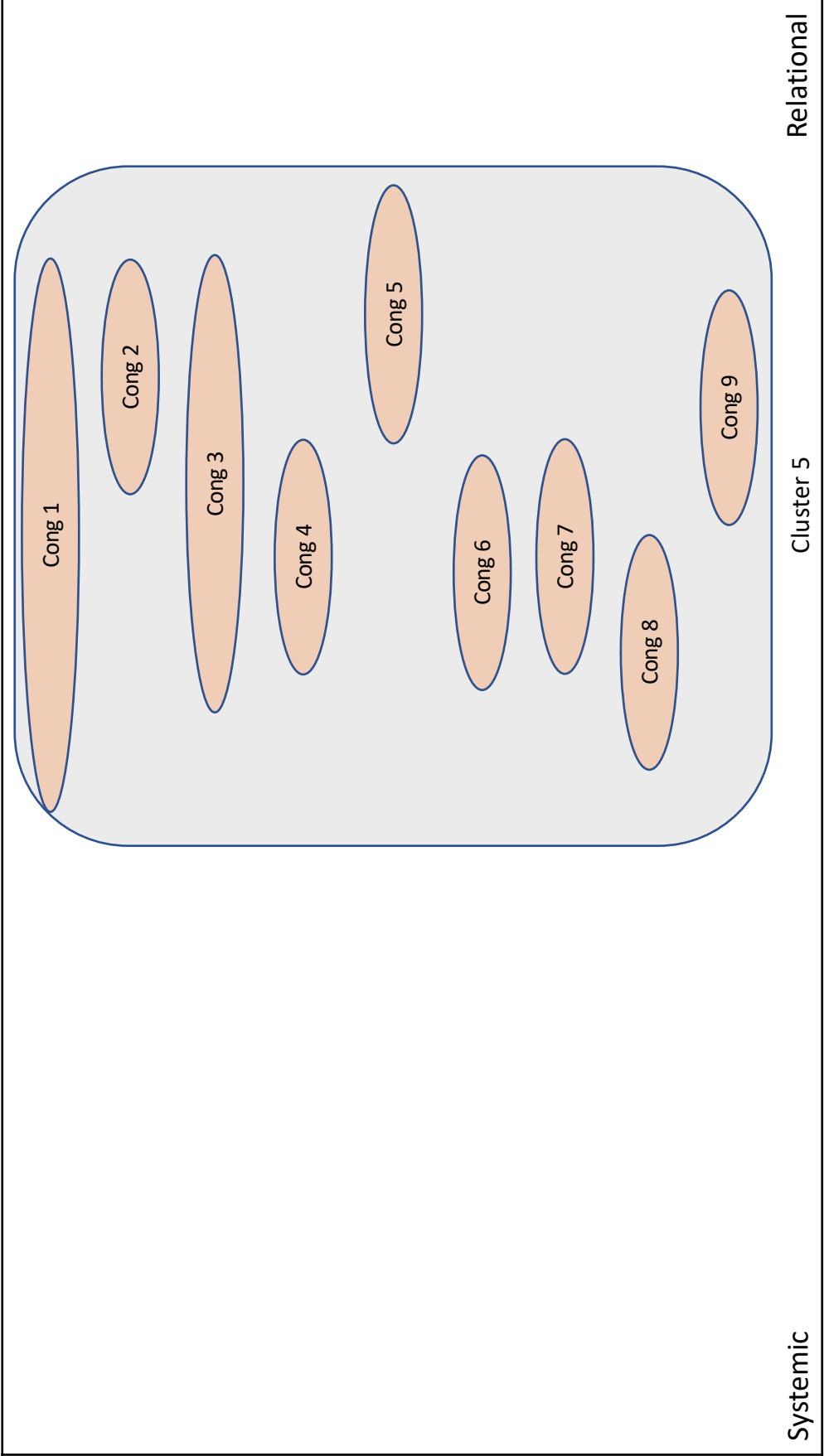
CHURCH RDs	
1	Church-owned system for establishing worshipper cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive alignment with and assent to the sacred texts of the trinitarian, theistic, Anglican tradition, interpreted on the basis of prioritising 'inclusion of the other'.
2	Church-owned system for establishing worshipper cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive alignment with and assent to the trinitarian, theistic, Christian tradition and Nazarene core values as expressed through a 'culturally-contextualised' approach to Biblical interpretation with the lens of God's love as 'Father'.
3	Church-owned system for establishing worshipper cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive alignment with and assent to the sacred texts of the trinitarian, theistic, Anglican tradition.
4	Church-owned system for establishing worshipper cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive alignment with and assent to the sacred texts of the trinitarian, theistic, Anglican tradition.
5	Church-owned system for establishing worshipper cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive alignment with and assent to the sacred texts of the trinitarian, theistic, Methodist tradition adopting a 'soft-literal' approach to the Bible and emphasising the 'Fatherhood of God', strong community and heart for the poor.
6	Church-owned system for establishing worshipper cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive alignment with and assent to the sacred texts of the trinitarian, theistic, Methodist tradition emphasising the human incarnation of Jesus.
7	Church-owned system for establishing worshipper cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive alignment with and assent to the sacred texts and practices of the trinitarian, theistic, Catholic tradition.
8	Church-owned system for establishing worshipper cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive alignment with and assent to the Biblical understanding of the trinitarian, theistic, Baptist tradition, with a 'charismatic' emphasis on evangelical interpretation of scripture and the personal experience of being 'led by the Holy Spirit'.
9	Church-owned system for establishing worshipper cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive alignment with and assent to the Biblical text as interpreted within the trinitarian, theistic, Reformed tradition, including an emphasis on the personal nature of God.

Common themes

Local-church-owned system for establishing worshipper cognitive engagement with the church through engagement with the sacred texts and values of the tradition, based on a trinitarian, theistic, concept of God and as mediated through the teaching of the local church.

C	Autistic worshippers, congregation , church (local and national).
A	Church leaders and 'approved' laity, (local, regional and national), autistic worshippers, neurotypical worshippers.
T	Providing cognitive engagement of worshippers through engagement with the sacred texts of the tradition – as interpreted and applied through the preaching and teaching of the local church.
W	Orthodox, trinitarian, theistic concept of God. The Bible seen as divinely inspired and authoritative when appropriately interpreted within the church's tradition and applied to a modern context.
O	Church institution – as moderated by the local church.
E	Faithfulness to denominational formulations of the appropriate Tradition within the broader 'Western/Augustinian Christian Tradition'.

Summary Root Definition Mapping – 3 (Congregation RDs)



Cluster 5: Root Definition (Congregations)

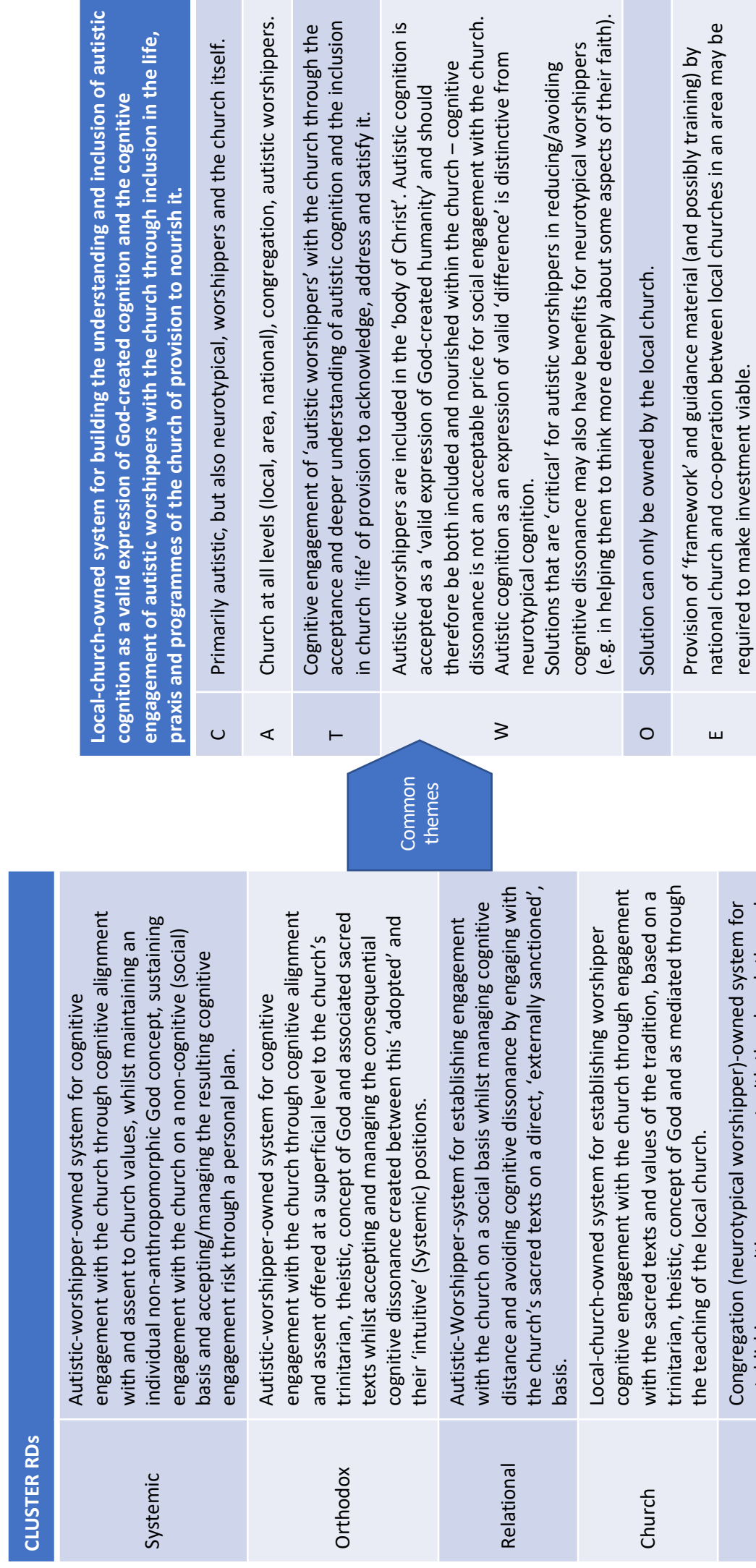
CONGREGATION RDs	
1	Congregation-owned system for cognitive engagement with the church through broad cognitive alignment with and assent to the presented Anglican tradition on an independently-minded basis, modified by a more 'personal' understanding of God and prayer.
2	Congregation-owned system for cognitive engagement with the church through broad cognitive alignment with and assent to the presented Nazarene tradition in principle, modified by a more 'direct and experiential' understanding of scripture and emphasis on community.
3	Congregation-owned system for cognitive engagement with the church through broad cognitive alignment with and assent to the presented Anglican tradition.
4	Congregation-owned system for cognitive engagement with the church through broad cognitive alignment with and assent to the presented Anglican tradition.
5	Congregation-owned system for cognitive engagement with the church through unquestioning cognitive alignment with and assent to the presented Methodist tradition, with a particularly strong emphasis on community.
6	Congregation-owned system for cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive alignment with and assent to the presented Methodist tradition, with a somewhat legalistic approach to the application of scripture.
7	Congregation-owned system for cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive alignment with and assent to the presented Catholic tradition – as understood on the basis of 'personalised interpretation'.
8	Congregation-owned system for cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive alignment with and assent to the presented Baptist tradition and interpretation of scripture, supported by some experience of the gifts of the Holy Spirit.
9	Congregation-owned system for cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive alignment with and assent to the presented Reformed understanding of scripture, interpreted and applied within a personal context.

Common themes

Congregation (neurotypical worshipper)-owned system for establishing cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive alignment with and assent to the church's teaching and tradition, emphasising the 'personal' nature of God.

C	Congregation (neurotypical worshippers).
A	Congregation, church leaders and 'approved' laity.
T	Cognitive engagement with the church through cognitive alignment and assent to church values and teaching.
W	The church is the appropriate authority to 'say' what the truth is – adoption of the 'given' understanding is the price of social engagement with the Church. The right to provide a 'personal interpretive slant' – leading to a somewhat more 'relational' perspective than that proposed by the church.
O	Congregation: Neurotypical worshipper choice to align.
E	Some 'personal interpretation limits' permitted by local church for congregation members. Desire of congregation members to 'belong' to the congregation.

Mapping out a potential 'space for a solution'



Adaptations made by Autistic Worshipers and their Churches

Adaptation by Autistic Worshipper	Freq	Notes	Participants
Attitudinal 'acceptance' of difference	5	Accepted, if not understood, by church.	1, 2, 3, 8, 9
Selective engagement (with service or activity)	5	Accepted, if not understood, by church.	1, 2, 7, 8, 9
Own reading	2	Accepted, if not understood, by church.	2, 9
Being involved – finding a role	2	More a social adaptation. Church lets me get on with it – but does not understand.	5, 6
Attend other gathering/Church	2	In addition to 'home church'. Understood by 'home' church.	8, 9
Reinterpretation at 'conflict points'	1	Private re-alignment & disassociation.	3
Make notes & draw	1	Helps concentration. Accepted, if not understood, by church.	4
Occasional 'wandering about' during songs	1	More a sensory adaptation. Accepted, if not understood, by church.	4
Theological education	1	Provided context information to support interpretation and application.	7
Adaptation by Church	Freq	Notes	Participants
None	9	3 participants (3, 7 and 9) noted that they would not expect the church to make any adaptations on their behalf.	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9

Recommendations for change: Education & Understanding

Recommendation	Freq	Notes	Participants
Better understanding and tolerance relating to autism – especially around healing, ‘appearing autistic’	4	Imperfect ‘application’ of Biblical truth is not just a matter of ‘poor choice’ – there are genuine difficulties to navigate.	4, 6, 7, 8
Tolerance of ‘different responses’	4	Not everyone will respond to things in the same way.	2, 7, 8, 9
Tolerance of ‘selective attendance’	3	Related to ‘social’ and ‘sensory’ factors.	1, 8, 9
Acknowledgement of the ‘doesn’t work for me’ factor	2	Background understanding that underpins other measures.	1, 2
No change needed	2		3, 6

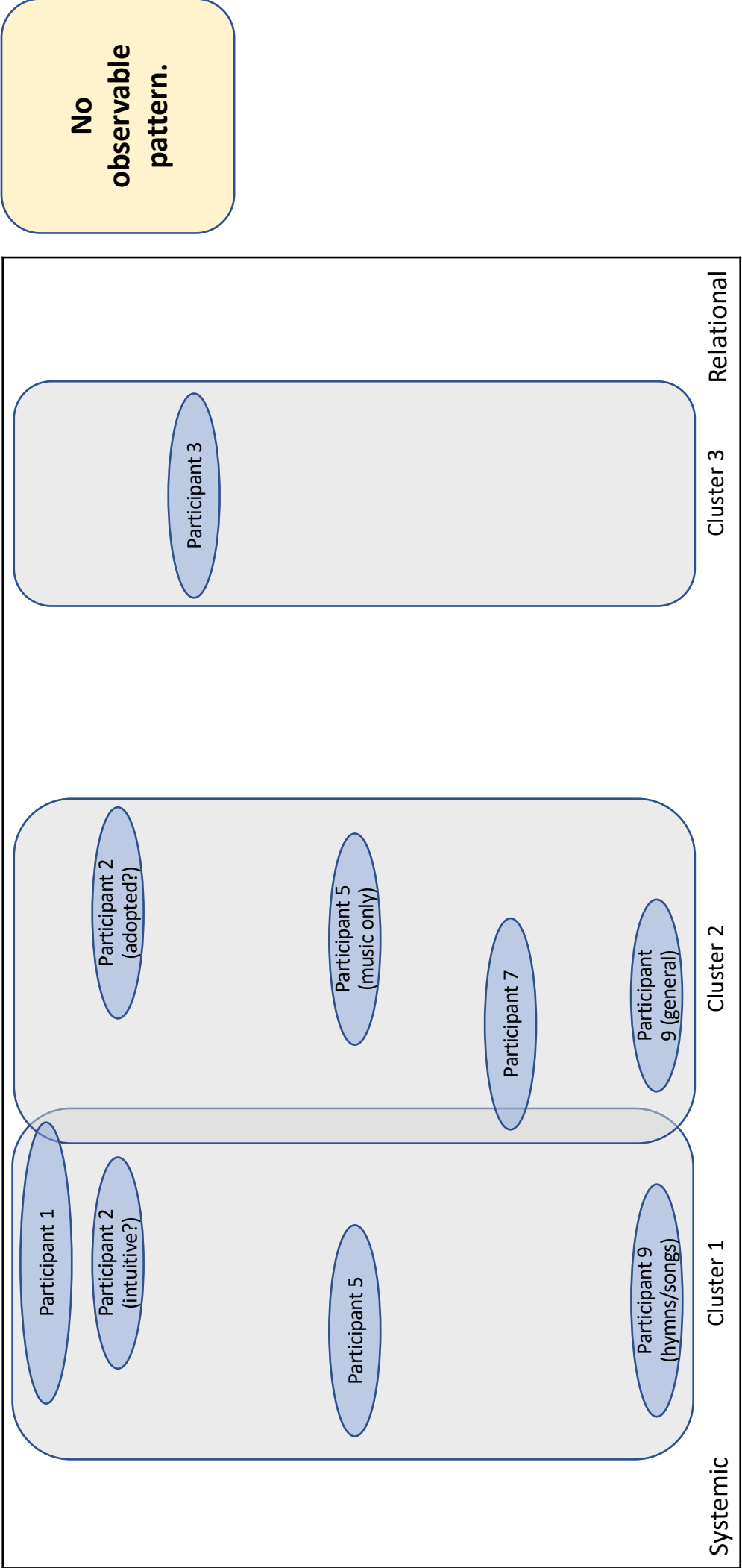
Recommendations for change: Practical Change

Recommendation	Freq	Notes	Participants
Group for in-depth study of different approaches	4	Exploring context & help with interpretation.	1, 2, 5, 7
More help with 'how-to' points in sermons	1	Autistic people want to create rules.	4
Someone with time to listen & talk	1	Often our questions won't, at first sight, seem to make much sense.	4

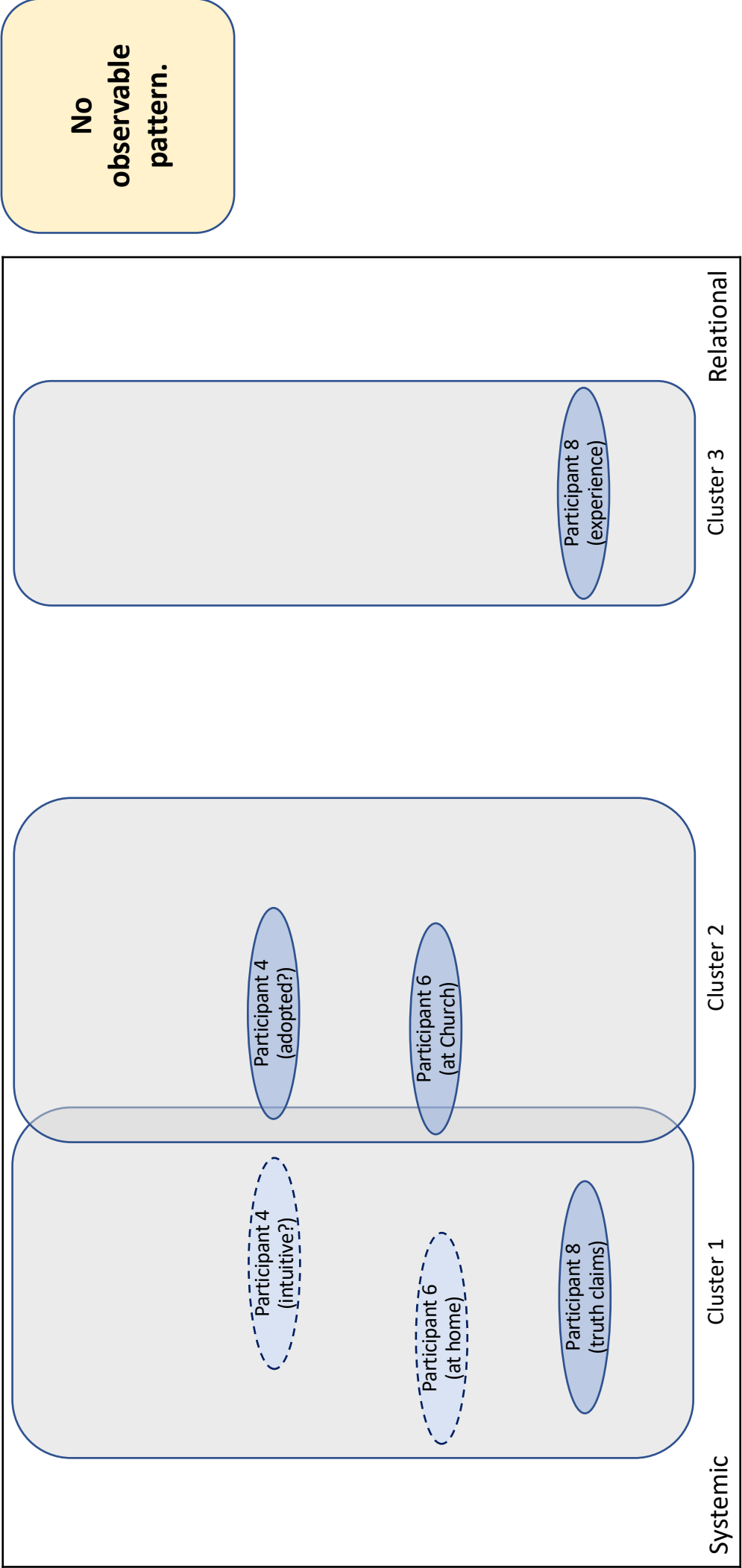
Recommendations for change: Non-cognitive

Recommendation	Freq	Notes	Participants
Not being threatened by the way we express things – can be very direct/blunt – not judging	2	People can take things very personally and focus on the emotion, not the 'view'. Non-cognitive – social.	5, 7
Recognising that halogen lights are bad	1	Non-cognitive, sensory.	5
Supporting the use of ear-protectors or ear-phones for those who have sensory issues around music or singing	1	Non-cognitive, sensory.	8
Recognition of travel restrictions re group meetings	1	Many on spectrum not in a position to drive.	1

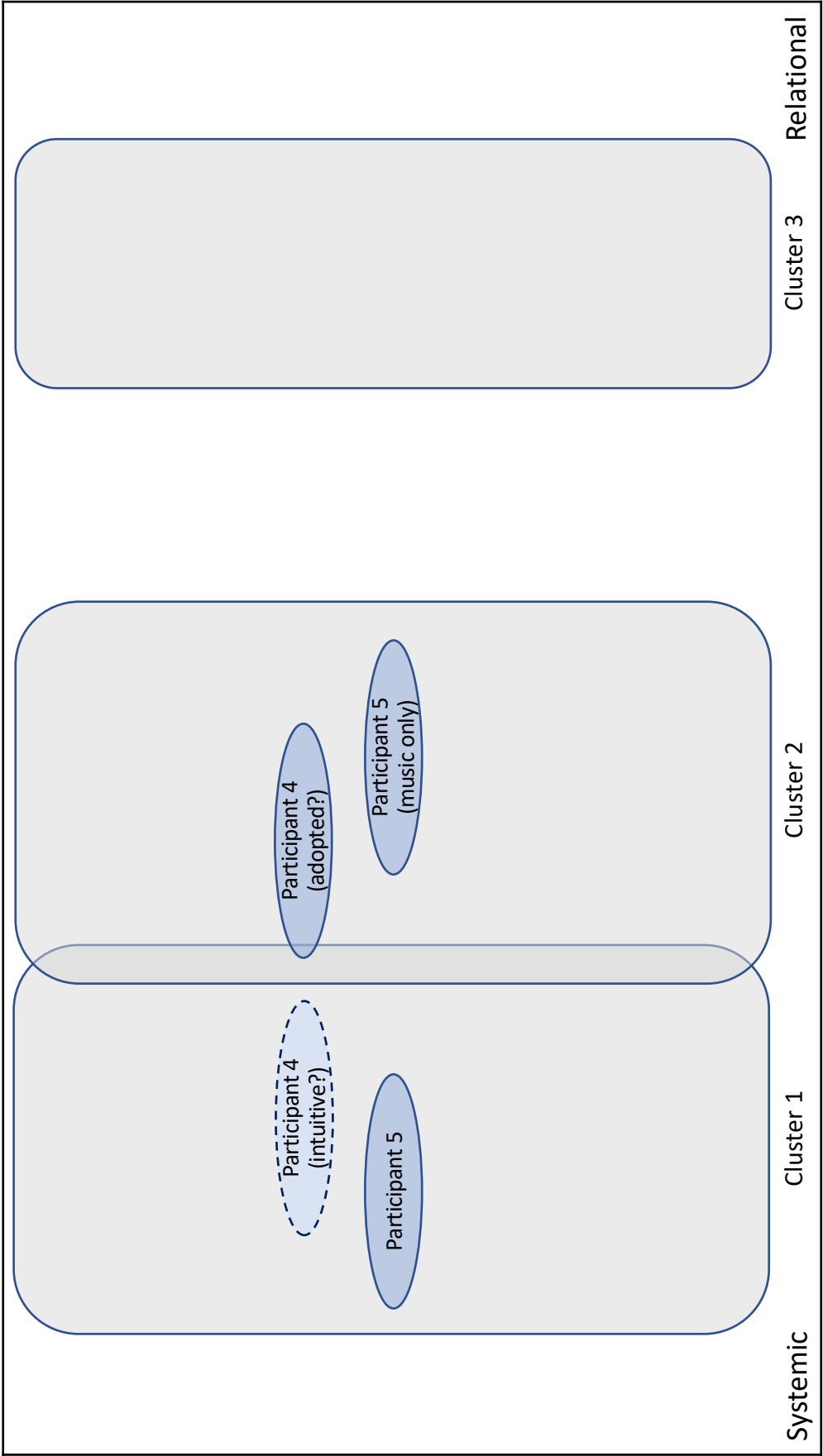
Extra Analysis: Summary Root Definition Mapping (perceived ‘males’)



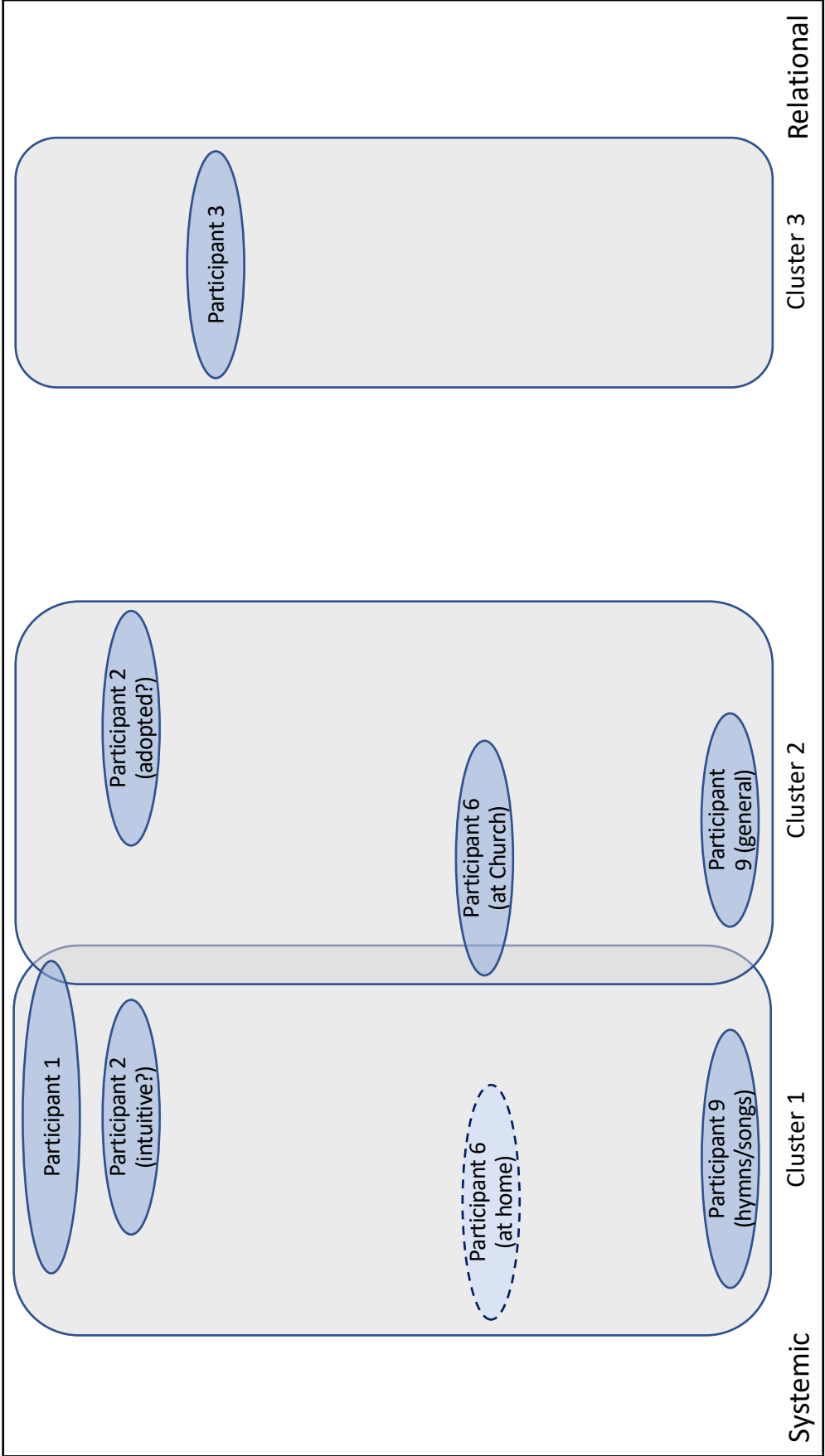
Extra Analysis: Summary Root Definition Mapping (perceived ‘females’)



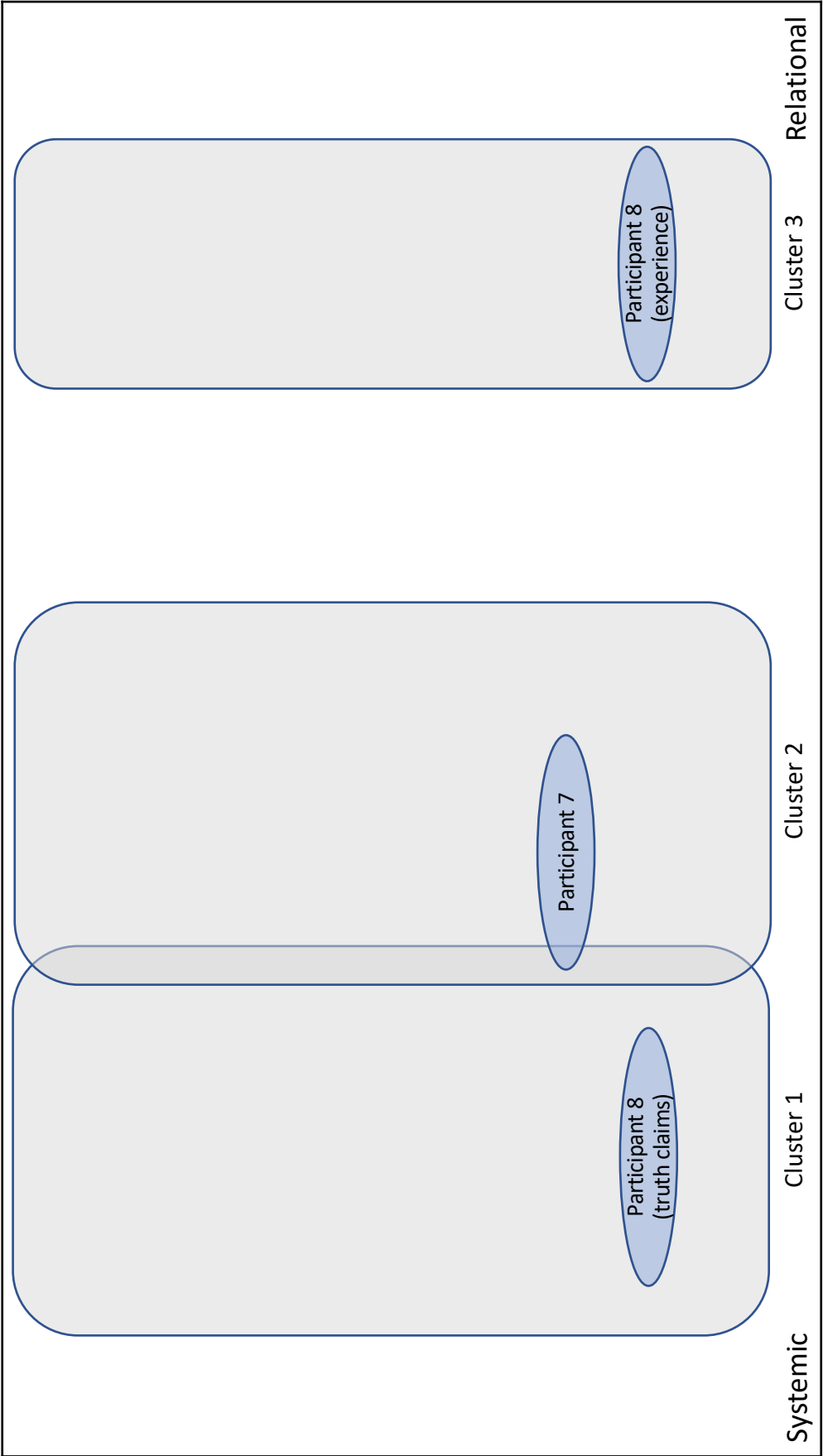
Extra Analysis: Summary Root Definition Mapping (Aged 18-30)



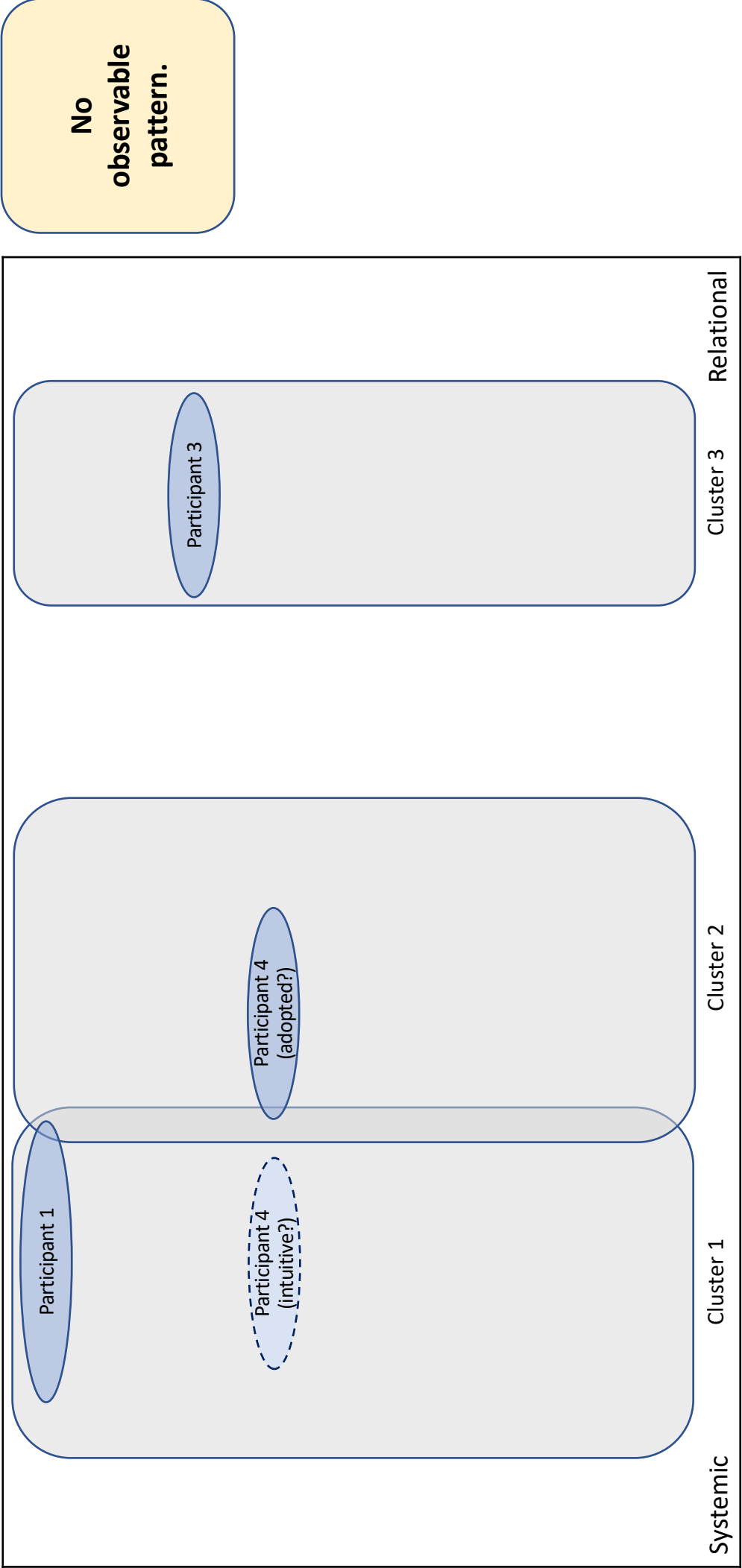
Extra Analysis: Summary Root Definition Mapping (Aged 31-60)



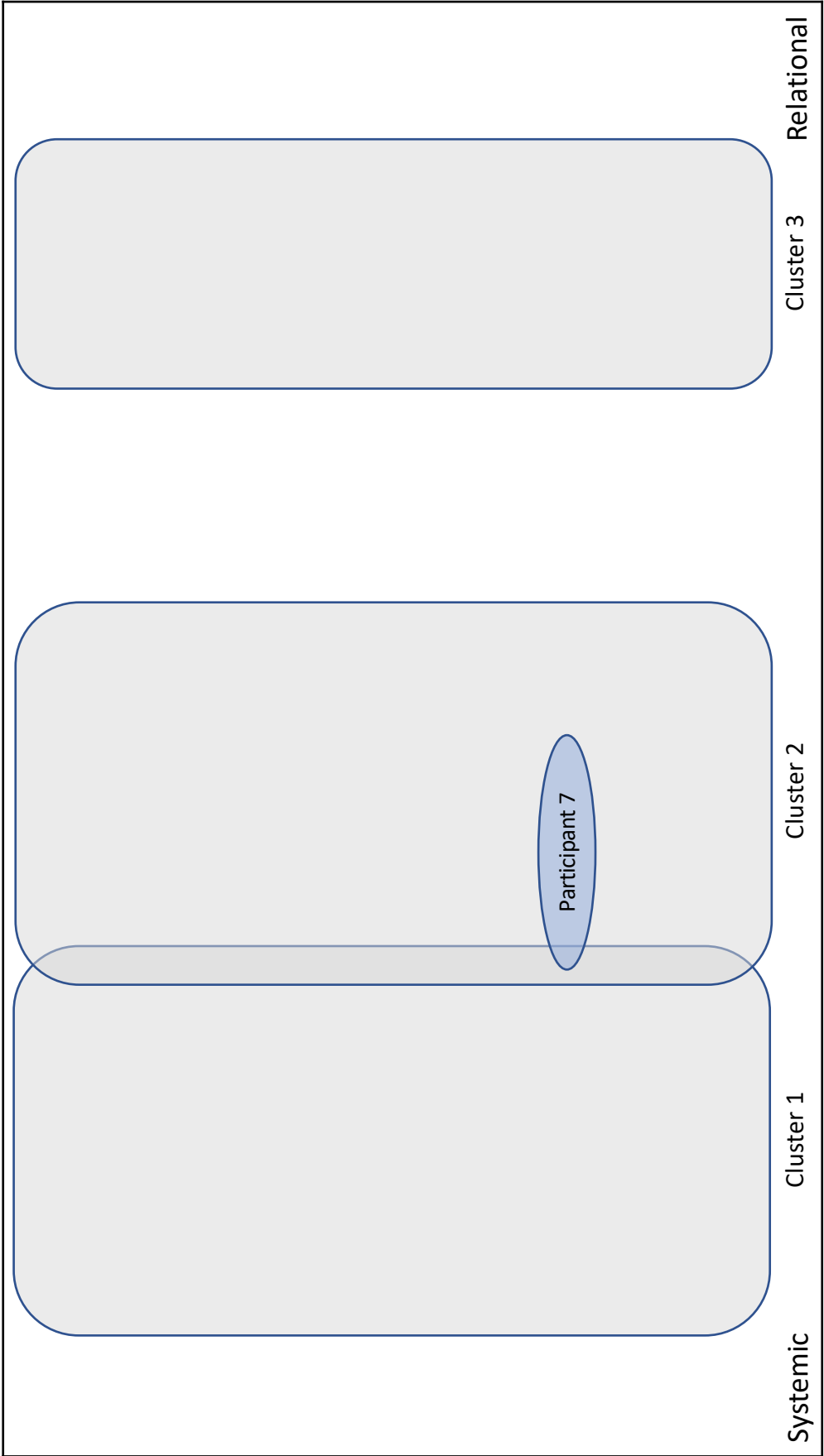
Extra Analysis: Summary Root Definition Mapping (Aged 61+)



Extra Analysis: Summary Root Definition Mapping (Anglican)

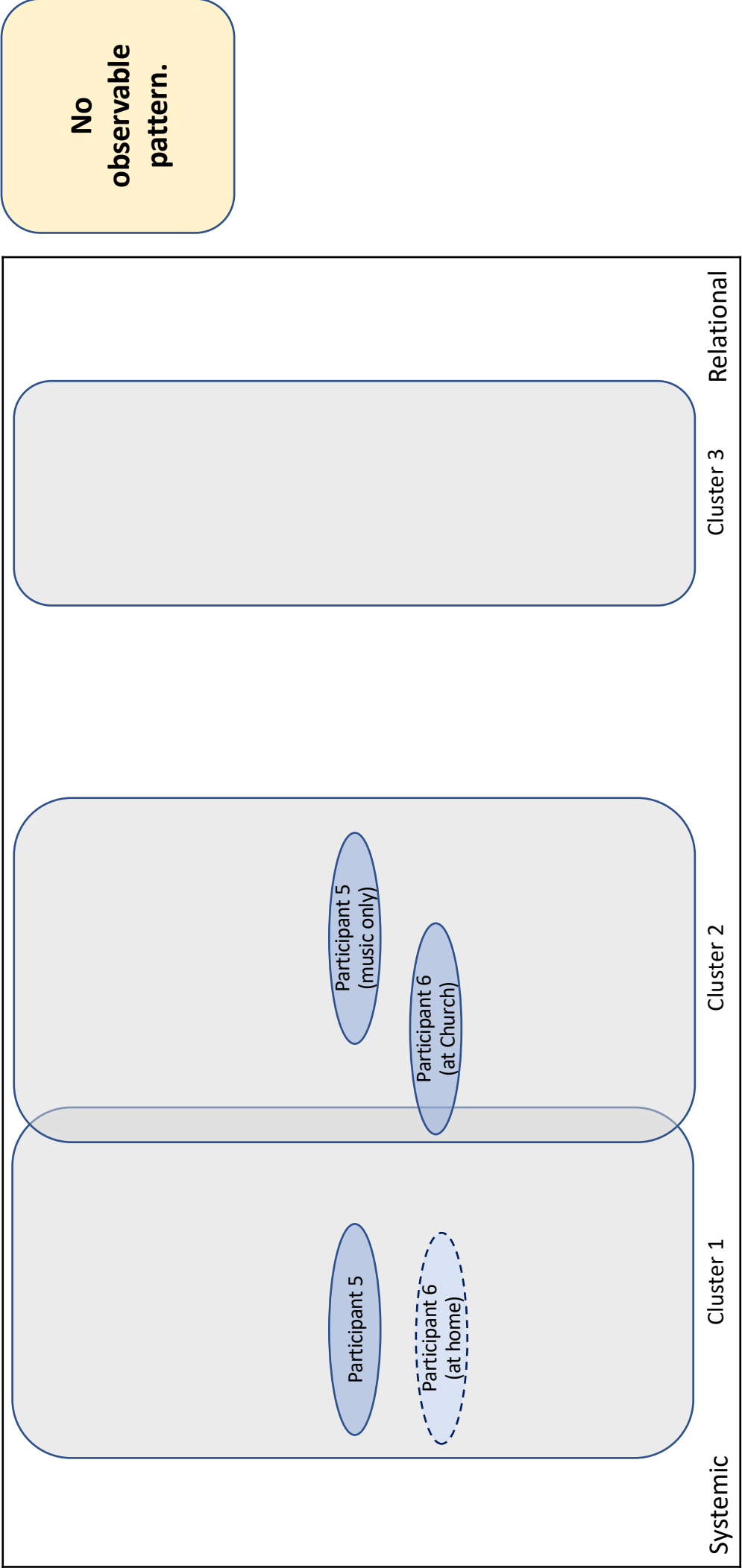


Extra Analysis: Summary Root Definition Mapping (Catholic)

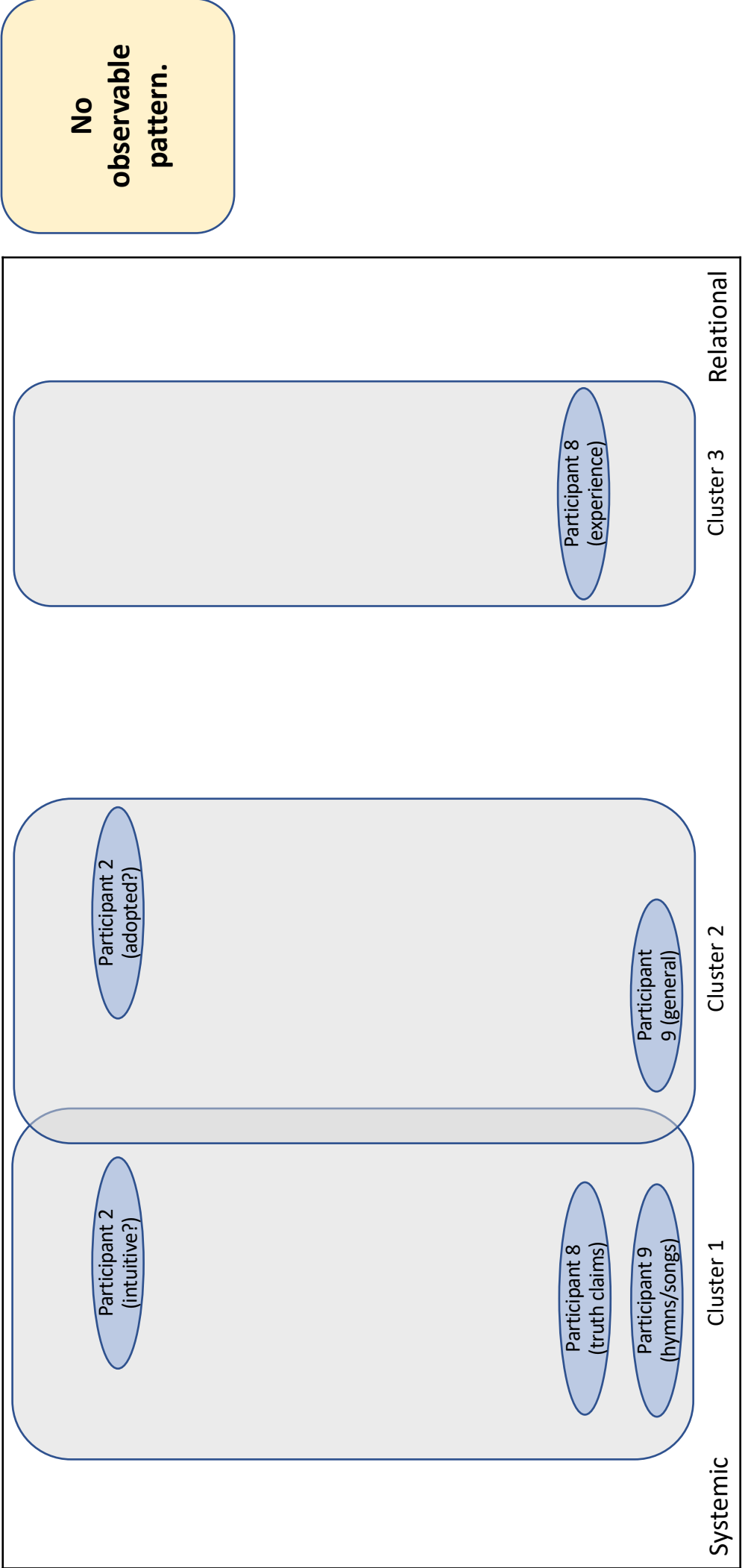


No
observable
pattern.

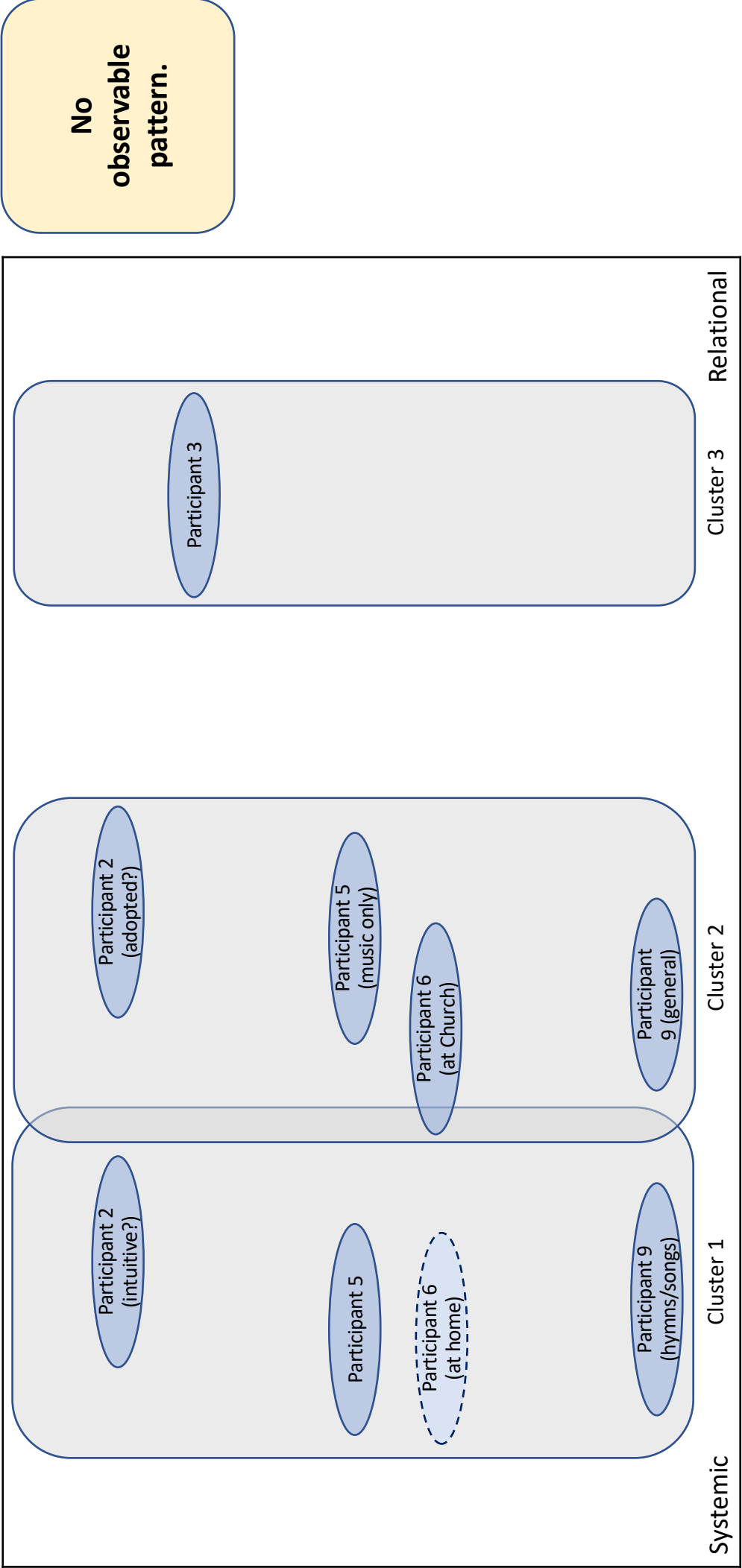
Extra Analysis: Summary Root Definition Mapping (Methodist)



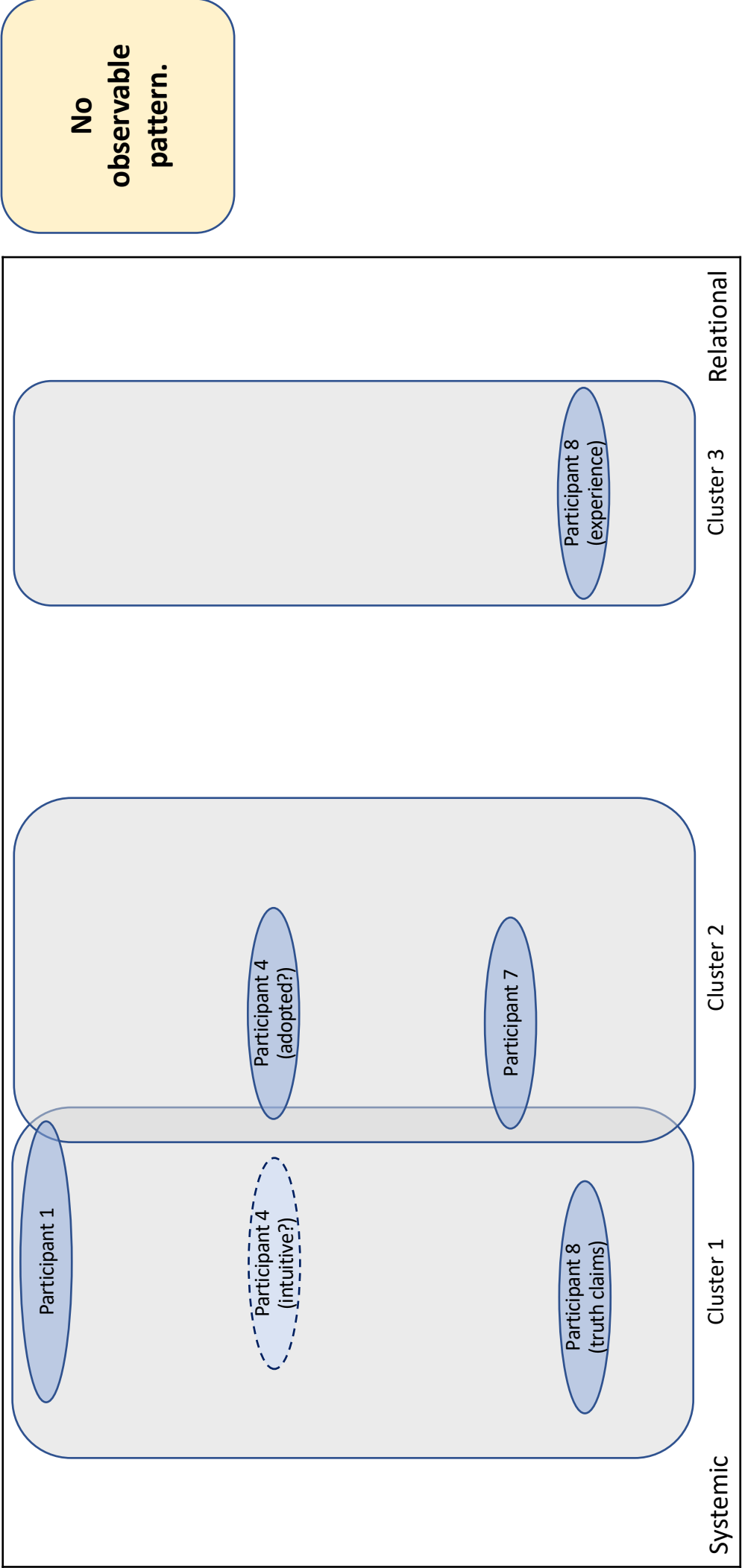
Extra Analysis: Summary Root Definition Mapping (Other churches)



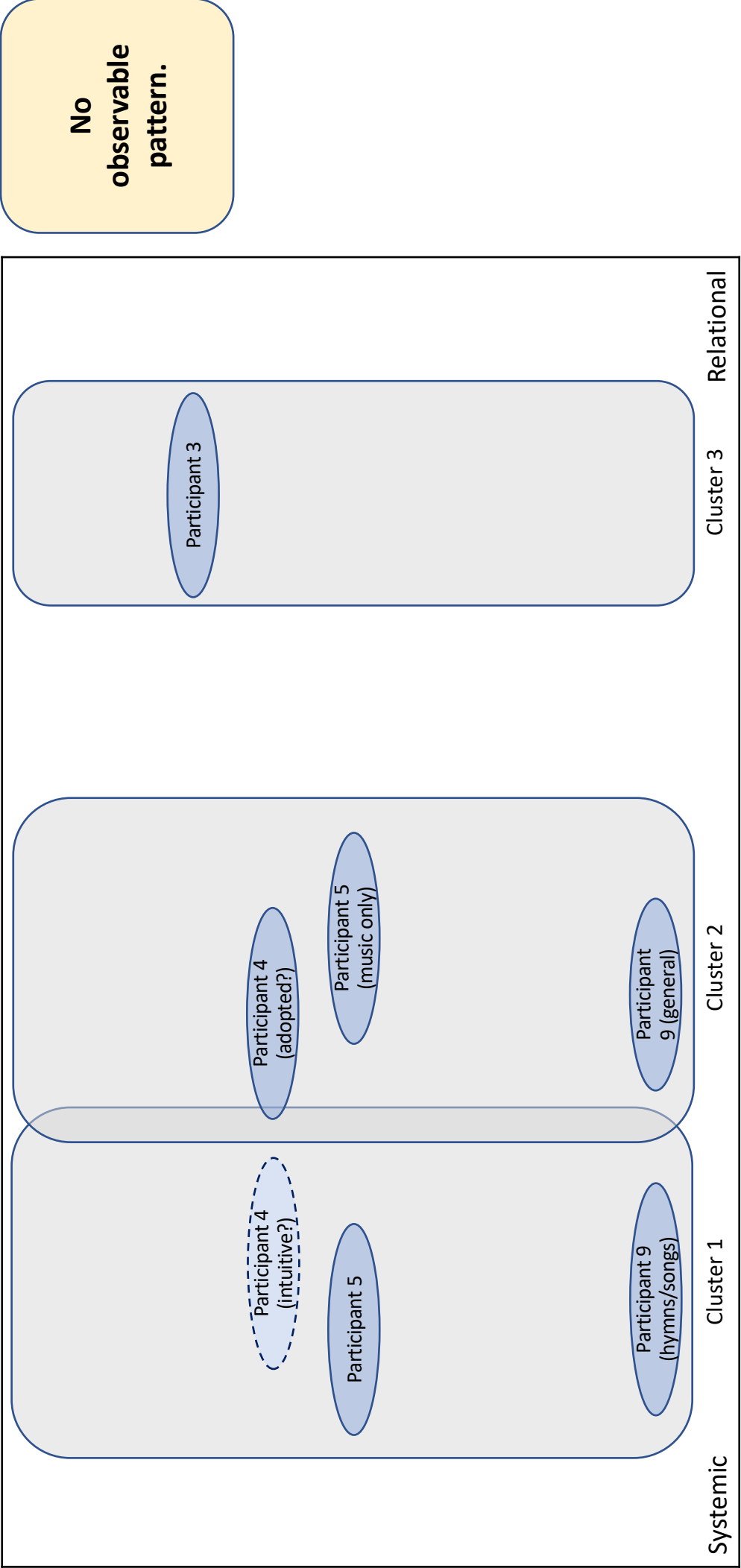
Extra Analysis: Summary Root Definition Mapping (Congregation 0-50)



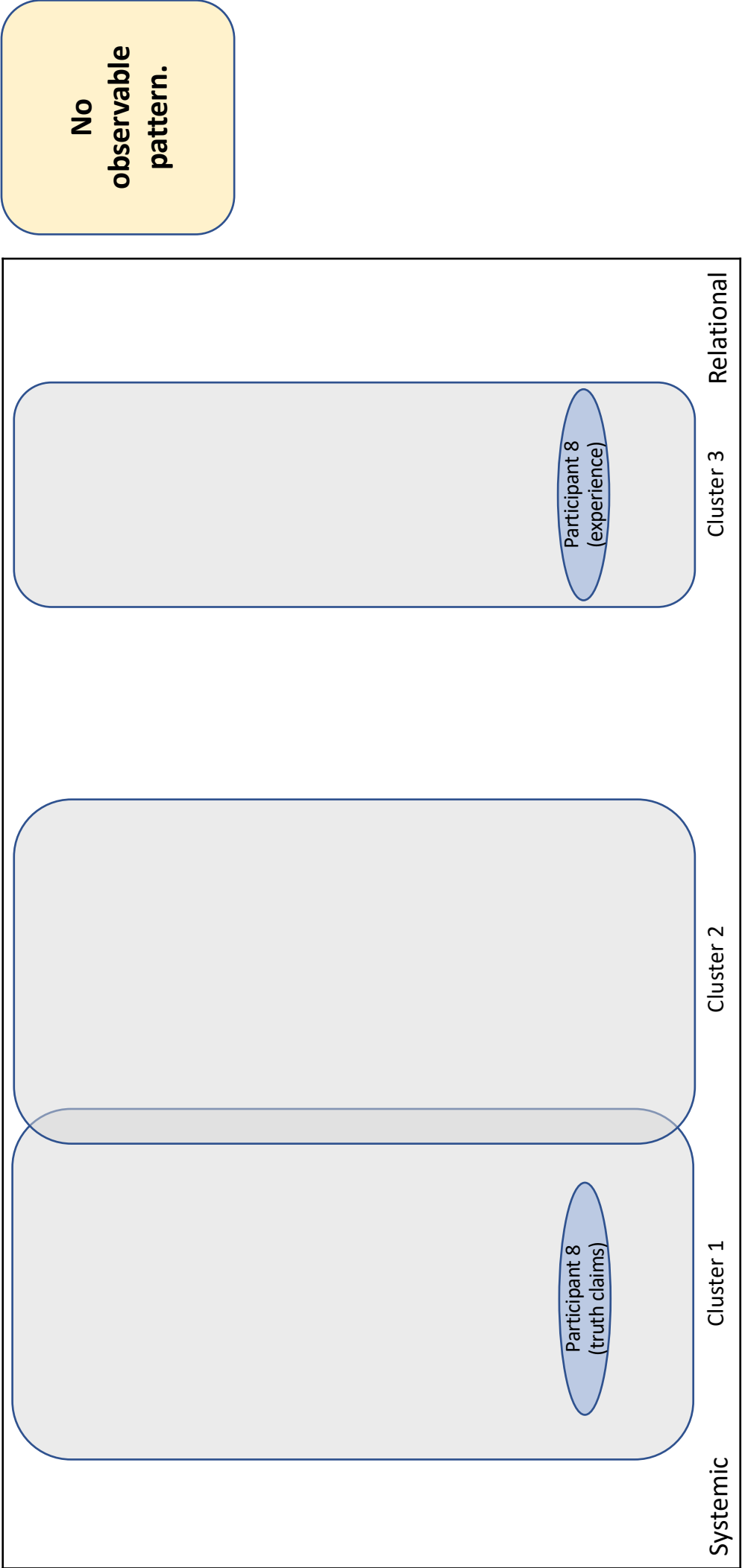
Extra Analysis: Summary Root Definition Mapping (Congregation 201+)



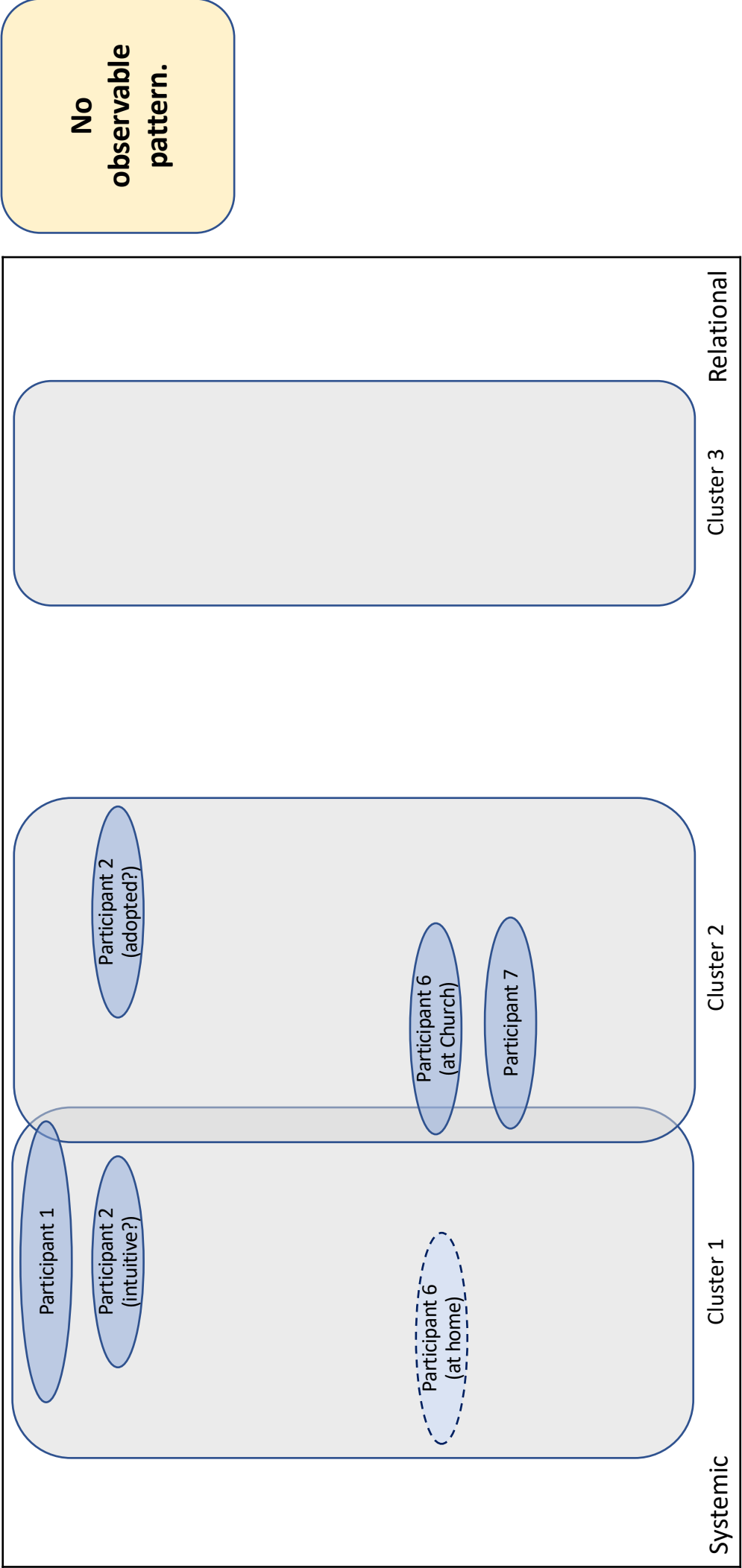
Extra Analysis: Summary Root Definition Mapping (Diagnosis <5y)



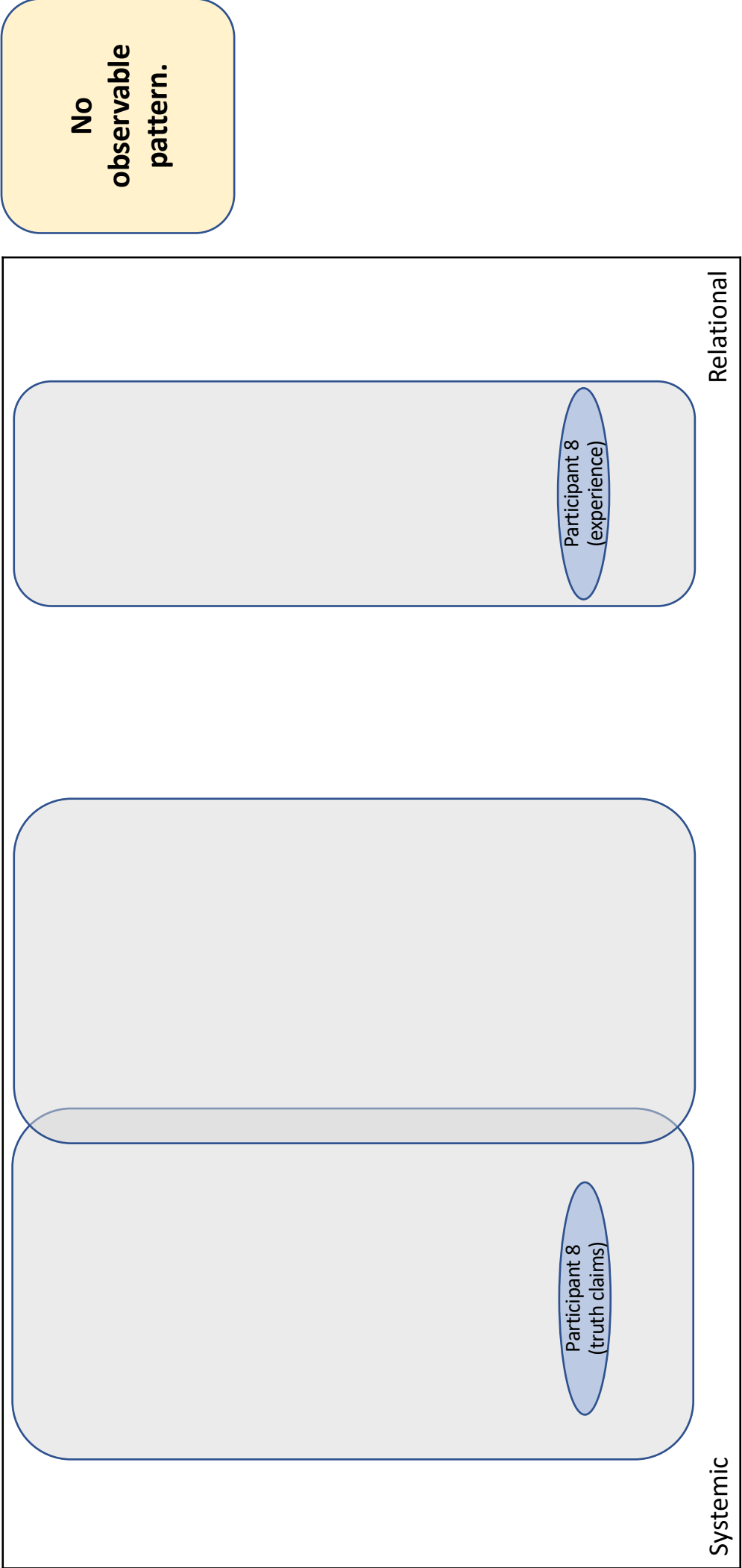
Extra Analysis: Summary Root Definition Mapping (Diagnosis 5-10yr)



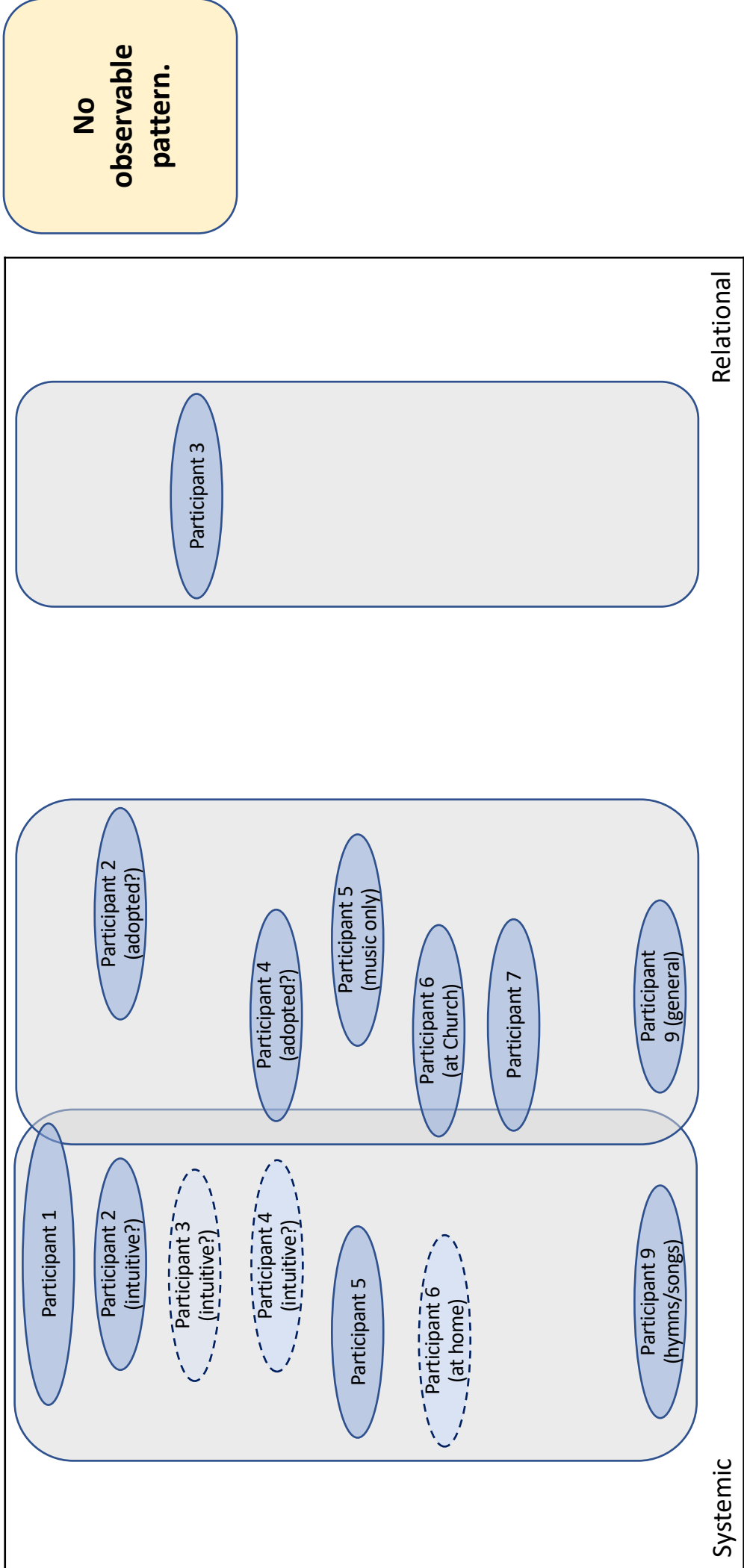
Extra Analysis: Summary Root Definition Mapping (Diagnosis > 10yr)



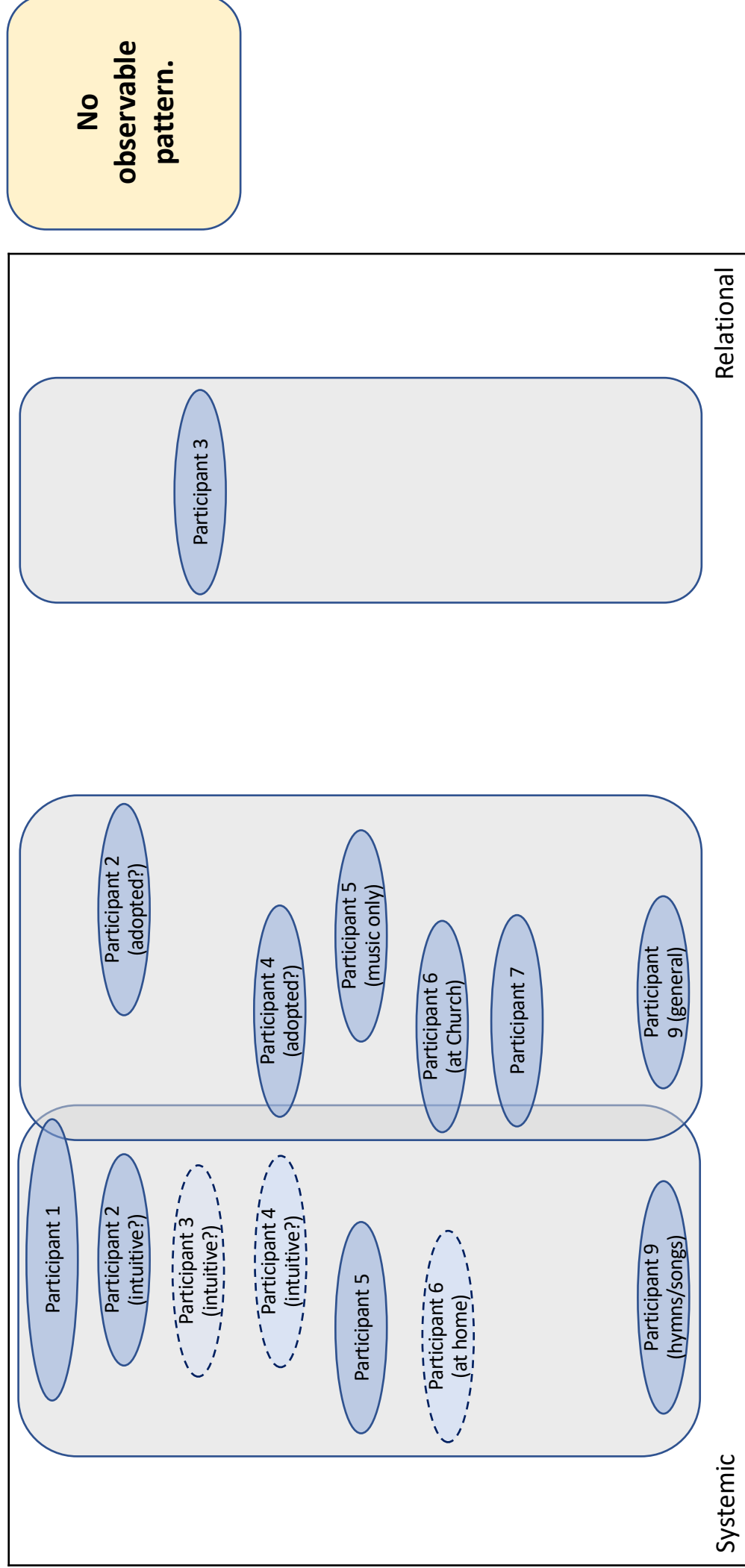
Extra Analysis: Summary Root Definition Mapping (Time a Christian 5-10y)



Extra Analysis: Summary Root Definition Mapping (Time a Christian 10+y)



Extra Analysis: Summary Root Definition Mapping (0-5 Autistic Worshipers)



Extra Analysis: Summary Root Definition Mapping (6-10 Autistic Worshipers)

