

Executive Summary

What difference do Methodist church congregations make to the communities they live in? This report presents findings of a nationwide study of Methodist Church congregations carried out in the autumn of 2005 by the Social Research Centre at Roehampton University. The research was quantitative in methodology and aimed to examine how Methodist congregations are involved in their communities.

The survey used a stratified random sample of 49 churches across Britain, involving around 1500 churchgoers. With a response rate of 70 per cent, we are confident about how representative the results are. Nevertheless, some caution is needed when comparing the responses of Methodist members with the wider population. Wherever possible standardised and agreed measures were used to assess the extent of community involvement engaged in by Methodists. However, Methodist church congregation members tend to be both older and better educated than the general population - and either or both of these characteristics are likely to have influenced our results.

To study the difference Methodist churches might make to community life, the project used the concept of social capital to frame the research. Social capital is an idea that seeks to make sense of the connections between people. The key indicators of social capital are trust, civic engagement, the giving and receiving of help, contact with families and friends and participation in community groups and activities.

Churches are often seen as an integral part of community life – and as important generators and stores of social capital. This research sought to establish the levels and forms of social capital found among Methodist church congregations; how this compared with social capital across the population as a whole; and what the significance of this was for the difference Methodist congregations make to their local communities.

The project was particularly interested in looking at what might be thought of as the outward or community facing connections of Methodist congregations (bridging social capital) and the inward or church facing connections (bonding social capital). A place of worship might provide a location where individuals united by a shared faith meet, socialise and support one another (bonding social capital). Some groups might in turn encourage their members to transfer this sense of companionship to non-members in the wider community in the form of formal and informal voluntary work, community involvement and campaigning (bridging social capital).

The results of the survey indicate that overall Methodist congregations have relatively high stocks of social capital. In some types of activity, for example, civic participation and volunteering, it appears they may be more active than the population at large. Theories of social capital stress the importance of trust. The more trusting a social group is the more likely its members are to become involved in community activities. The results of this research suggest that Methodist members have high levels of trust and that this is translated into social participation. For example, the higher levels of trust respondents have, the more action they have taken to solve a local problem and the more formal and informal voluntary work they have undertaken. Respondents with higher levels of trust are also more likely to believe they can influence decisions in their church and wider community. In turn, this belief that they can affect church and wider community decisions correlates significantly with higher levels of social activity.

Methodist congregations as a whole have a very positive view of their church. However, respondents rated their church better in the inward facing features than the outward facing ones. For example, the two most important popular choices were 'being part of a group' and 'sharing support/help with other church people'. By contrast, when asked what was important about their church respondents tended to choose outward facing features. For example, the two most important ones were 'openness to all people irrespective of difference' and 'promoting social justice'. There is, then, an interesting difference in how respondents rated the activities of their church and what they believed the church should be doing. Overall, they believed the church was doing a better job on the inward facing dimension but that this was less important than the outward facing activities.

Indeed, one third of respondents felt their church did not do enough work in the local community. This group were more likely to be male and have higher educational qualifications than the remaining two-thirds of respondents. However, all respondents were in broad agreement about what was important about the work of the church in their community. A half of respondents felt that the primary role of the church is to provide social support in the local community. However, the results do not suggest what form this support might take. We know that it is probably not in terms of becoming some kind of alternative local welfare state – this was not ranked particularly highly. But the results do suggest that Methodist congregations view other types of work in the community as important.

Overall, we conclude that Methodist church congregations make positive contributions to their communities. As far as we can tell, Methodists are more engaged in the community than the population at large. Methodist congregations possess higher levels of neighbourhood and general trust, are tolerant of difference and are more likely to be involved in both formal and informal voluntary activity. Furthermore, the results of the research tend to suggest a breakdown of the distinction between bridging and bonding social capital. To be on the inside of the church (a member of a Methodist congregation) is at one and the same time to be engaged with the outside (the community).

Introduction

What difference do Methodist church congregations make to the communities they live in? The 2001 Church Life Profile offered a revealing insight into the experiences, opinions and attitudes of Methodist churchgoers. The study found that Methodists place a high value on caring for the wider community as well as caring for one another. The findings suggested that Methodists were less likely to be involved in church-based evangelism, but more likely to be involved in community and social work, and in pastoral care or church committee work.

This report takes a step on from the Church Life Profile. It presents findings of a nationwide study of Methodist church congregations carried out in the autumn of 2005 by the Social Research Centre at Roehampton University. It is based on the responses of more than a thousand Methodist church attendees from forty-nine churches across the country. The survey looked at the lives, values and attitudes of congregations both inside and outside the church.

This report deals with two key aspects concerning Methodist church congregations. One aspect is the attitudes and beliefs of congregation members. This enables us to establish how congregations view their church in terms of: (a) the church's work in the church community and in the wider local community; and (b) how well the perceived role is fulfilled. The other aspect of the research looks at the participation of congregation members in their church and community. As well as being distinct from one another, these aspects are also linked: congregations' attitudes and beliefs give an indication to what can be thought of as the 'inward' (church-focused) and 'outward' (community-focused) facing orientation of church congregations. This in turn helps us to understand the underlying motivations of church congregation members in contributing to community life.

Assessing what difference a congregation makes to a community is not easy. This research used the concept of social capital to frame a survey that might answer this question. While the concept of social capital is not without its problems, as we discuss in the report, the aim of the research is to establish the levels of social capital found among

Methodist church congregations; how this compares with what we know about social capital across the population as a whole; and what this means for the relationship between church congregations and the wider community. The measurement of social capital is still in development. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) continues to develop quantitative measures of social capital - and the research team on this project worked with the ONS when developing the questionnaire.¹ The main dimensions of social capital are civic engagement, levels of trust, the giving and receiving of informal help, contact with families and friends, and participation in community groups and activities. These dimensions provide the main themes of the survey and this report.

The report breaks down into four sections. The first section looks at the concept of social capital, in particular in relation to churches and 'faith communities' more broadly. Section two presents the profile of Methodist churchgoers in the survey and looks at their attitudes to the church and the wider community. The third section takes this profile forward by examining the survey responses along the dimensions of social capital. The final section discusses the research findings in terms of the difference Methodist churches make to communities. It also considers the usefulness of the concept of social capital in this respect.

1. Churches, social capital and the community

Faith-based organisations have traditionally been viewed as playing a central role in maintaining and sustaining local communities. The idea of the local church acting as a focal point for the community is a familiar one. The church is viewed not just as a centre of spiritual life but also as a principal site of social support, friendship, organised activities and community mobilisation. In recent decades this image has suffered as congregations have declined and attention has been diverted to other ways of realising spiritual and social needs. But as Flint and Kearns point out, despite falling church congregations, faith groups are gaining political recognition as key actors in neighbourhood renewal strategies (Flint and Kearns 2004). Certainly as governments in

¹ For a review by the ONS of the literature on social capital, see *Social Capital: A Review of the Literature*, Social Analysis and Reporting Division, ONS, October 2001, <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/socialcapital/downloads/soccaplitreview.pdf>.

Britain and elsewhere have attempted to address what is seen as the decline of community life and to reform the provision of welfare and the delivery of public services, voluntary organisations, including churches and other faith-based groups, figure prominently in public policy thinking. This is often argued in terms of churches and faith-based organisations being important sites for the generation of social capital. That is, aside from their spiritual dimension, churches and faith communities play an important role in sustaining social networks, fostering co-operation, increasing levels of trust and encouraging involvement in both the local community and the wider community.

What is social capital?

Social capital is concerned with people's 'connectedness' with others in their social world. Social connections develop through interaction in formal and informal activities. The networks that arise from these contacts allow for the sharing of physical, emotional and informational resources. Social capital, it is argued, brings positive outcomes for individuals and communities that possess high stocks of social capital. Communities with higher social capital are, some suggest, healthier, better educated, more prosperous and economically dynamic, suffer lower crime rates, more democratic and better able to pursue common objectives (Woolcock, 2001; Fukuyama, 1995; Putnam 1995; Coleman 1990). However, social capital is not a given entity. It has rather to be developed and maintained, and without such maintenance stocks of social capital can be depleted that can take many years to replenish (Coleman, 1990; Fukuyama, 1995). Social capital is also seen to have its downsides. It can serve the interests of particular groups not society; can be exclusive rather than inclusive; and can strengthen non-democratic groups (Hooghe and Stolle, 2003).

Over the past decade social capital has become a progressively prominent concept within the social sciences and public policy.² The concept has many definitions, which as Harper (2002) points out, creates confusion about what constitutes social capital. The term social capital is often used in different ways by different authors. Sometimes the concept is used as a means of understanding a person's relative life chances; at other

² See, for example, the seminar on social capital, Performance and Innovation Unit, London, 26 March 2002, http://www.strategy.gov.uk/seminars/social_capital/index.asp; see also D.Halpern, *Social Capital* (Polity, Cambridge, 2004).

times it is used to explain the outcome of specific features about people such as their education, social class and wellbeing. As such there is considerable uncertainty about whether social capital is a causal variable or an outcome variable. If there is any consensus on what constitutes social capital, then trust, reciprocity and networks are seen as its defining characteristics. However, the current focus on social capital as a concept obscures the fact that issues of trust and reciprocity have been important in the social sciences since their inception. But with contemporary concerns about community breakdown, the growth of individualism and inequality of opportunities, the concept of social capital has become a fashionable means of understanding these issues within both academic and policy debates.

The work of Robert Putnam has been prominent in this revival. Working within the field of political science, Putnam's interest focuses on national and local systems that generate varying levels of social trust and civic involvement (Furstenberg, 2005). Putnam distinguishes between bonding and bridging social capital and the different benefits of each. Bonding social capital is 'inward looking'. It refers to the social capital between homogeneous groups of people, for example, family members and close friends. Bonding social capital reinforces exclusive identities and is important for 'getting by'. Bridging social capital by contrast is 'outward looking'. It is inclusive and refers to the social capital that arises between people of diverse social backgrounds. Bridging social capital is important for 'getting ahead'. Bonding and bridging social capital are viewed as being equally beneficial, though in different ways and at different life stages. Putnam argues that both bridging and bonding social capital can have 'powerfully positive social effects' (Putnam, 2000, p. 23).

Many groups can at the same time bond along some social dimensions and bridge across others. Groups might possess homogeneous-type characteristics, for example, members of a church sharing the same religion, while being made up of people from diverse ethnic backgrounds. Bonding and bridging, Putnam claims, 'are not "either-or" categories into which social networks can be neatly divided, but "more or less" dimensions along which we can compare different forms of social capital' (2000, p. 23). Furthermore, social capital can at the same time be a private and a public good. Investment in social capital can benefit bystanders, for example the neighbour who does

not participate but gains through the workings of his or her local neighbourhood watch programme. Putnam highlights organisations like the Rotary that raise funds and awareness for others while at the same time 'provide members with friendships and business connections that pay off personally' (2000, p. 20).

Social capital, then, is increasingly viewed as being a crucial aspect of the positive functioning of a community. Putnam describes social capital as 'features of social life - networks, norms and trust - that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives' (Putnam, 1995 in Casey, 2004). It is through the workings of social capital that common goals can be met that without it they would not be, or would be met only at a higher cost (Coleman, 1990). Social capital is thus seen as key to democratic governance. Hooge and Stolle point out that some, though not all, networks resolve collective action problems and strengthen democracy. Central to this is the issue of generalised trust and generalised reciprocity, that is, trust and reciprocity among people who are not known to each other. Generalised trust and generalised reciprocity are integral to democratic political culture because they denote tolerance and openness amongst people who are different (Hooge and Stolle, 2003).

Fukuyama considers trust as the foundation from which social capital can be created: 'social capital is a capability that arises from the prevalence of trust in a society or in certain parts of it. It can be embodied in the smallest and most basic social group (family) plus the nation - the largest - and in all other in-between groups' (Fukuyama, 1996, p. 26). Trust and social capital are intrinsically linked. In communities where social capital is high, levels of trust will also be high. Reciprocity and associations with others cannot develop without trust. Fukuyama points out that reciprocity between people reduces costs of everyday life: where levels of trust are high, less cost is incurred. For example, in high trust neighbourhoods, people might invest less in security against burglary. They might also benefit from neighbours 'looking out' for one another. Reciprocity is a key factor in that a person might keep an eye on a neighbour's home while they are away in the knowledge that their neighbour will return the favour at a later date.

Churches, faith communities and social capital

A nationwide survey of US congregations in 2001 suggested that faster growing Presbyterian churches were more involved in group activities in their congregations and in the wider community than the Presbyterian churches in general (Bruce and Woolever, 2004). Putnam points out that in America half of all volunteering is religious in character. People's involvement in church or religion, he suggests therefore, is very important for generating and maintaining social capital. The social participation of church people is not restricted to church-based activities, Putnam argues. They are more likely than non-church people to be involved in secular organisations, to vote and to have deeper informal social connections. This is partly because churchgoers befriend others who recruit them into other forms of community involvement. Putnam views the church as 'an important incubator for civic skills, civic norms, community interests, and civic recruitment' (Putnam 2000, p. 66). Church activities facilitate the development of transferable skills such as giving speeches, running meetings and taking administrative responsibility.

Harris (1998) looks at churches as organisations and examines the issues congregations face in a changing religious and public policy climate. Churches are recognised within public policy as an integral part of welfare provision; church congregations are involved in charitable activities and care-giving practices. This welfare role of congregations is not only given between members, but extends to people in their local communities. For example, as well as care-giving, churches are also recognised for what Harris describes as their 'advocacy activities', that is, their involvement in 'local social action and community development projects' (see also Finneron, 1993). Harris highlights how expectations placed on congregations to expand social welfare provision have 'become an integral part of a pluralist welfare-delivery system'. Such expectations are rising rapidly at a time when numerous initiatives have aimed to shift the focus of responsibility from the public sector to the voluntary sector.

Harris suggests that congregations can support some forms of caring more successfully than others. Congregations are better at 'less organised' welfare, illustrated by their pastoral care type activities. Formal, or 'more organised' welfare - in the form of funded

community projects for example - are less suited to congregational input because of the different demands organised welfare places on volunteers, such as formal training. Church volunteers are usually untrained. A further issue for church congregations concerns the autonomy of their involvement in welfare projects. Volunteers may value highly the independence they are able to maintain while volunteering but this is likely to be threatened with the formalisation or outside intervention of the project. The tensions associated with outside intervention might make involvement in welfare projects less appealing to church volunteers.

The idea that outside intervention in certain types of community projects is not necessarily a positive development is a view shared by Fukuyama (1996). He suggests that state intervention can have a detrimental effect on social capital; that activities undertaken by the state can result in people losing the ability to work with one another. Furthermore, Fukuyama points out, social capital is difficult to generate through public policy as it is a by-product of religion, tradition and custom, all of which are based on shared norms and values that governments have limited influence over.

A number of studies have investigated the social capital of faith organisations. Flint and Kearns (2004) for example looked at the Church of Scotland and its contributions to communities. This research distinguished between bridging and bonding social capital in order to assess the extent to which congregations' activities benefit the church or the wider community. Much of the study's findings are ambiguous. On the one hand churches tend to form partnerships with other churches rather than other types of community organisations. In addition, the main focus of congregations is reported to be member-orientated. In this sense the social capital of congregations is bonding in nature. On the other hand, Flint and Kearns point out, congregations 'aim to act as forces of social cohesion rather than exclusivity' (p. 22). They support and encourage integration of marginalised groups and attempt to tackle social tension in communities. The facilities and services congregations provide primarily benefit non-church people. These types of congregational activity indicate bridging social capital.

Flint and Kearns found congregations' contributions to social capital in their local communities were largely generated through involvement in non-church activities. A

substantially higher proportion of churchgoers were found to participate in outside-of-church voluntary organisations compared with national levels of voluntary participation. The most common type of support congregations contributed was practical - that is, the provision of meeting places, staff volunteers and financial assistance. The contributions made by congregations to social capital was found to be largely generated through the activities of individual members and through their involvement in other community organisations, and less so through 'church labelled' activities. Flint and Kearns suggest that in light of these findings, 'policy should focus more on supporting congregations in this facilitating and enabling role, rather than concentrating solely on congregations' involvement in direct service delivery' (2004, p. 24).

The work of Furbey et al (2006) further explores the connections between church, faith and social capital and emphasises the core principles of Christianity: justice and mercy. Commitment to these principles is expressed through forgiveness, loving, reconciliation, valuing all people and working for the common good that in turn motivates community involvement, co-operation, peacemaking, social justice and acceptance of others (2006, p.8). Furbey et al highlight the bridge-building and link-making characteristics of Christianity and other major faith traditions. Their study looked at faith organisations in four regions in England. They found that faith organisations make considerable bridging and linking social capital contributions 'through their co-presence in urban areas, their connecting frameworks, the use of their buildings, the spaces that their associational networks open up, their engagement in governance, and their work across boundaries with others in the public domain' (2006, p.50).

Lowndes (2004) emphasises the importance of faith based organisations as a means of creating bridging social capital in terms of linking people who by virtue of being different from one another would not ordinarily mix. Lowndes highlights the 'social bias' of certain social groups and suggests that many social activities people participate in tend to be oriented to a particular group type, that is, individuals who share similar characteristics or interests. Trade unions, golf clubs, campaigning groups and youth subcultures are examples of these. Any 'social bias' that might exist within specific faith groups, such as age and ethnicity, however, 'is not linked to the primary purpose of religious involvement' (Lowndes 2004, p. 9).

In their study of Manchester churches, the William Temple Foundation (2005) found that churches are highly engaged in regeneration and social capital enterprises. Churches initiate community projects and are involved in partnerships with both faith-based and secular organisations. Furthermore, church members expressed a commitment to inclusivity, diversity and openness that fostered relations of trust and underpinned the generation of social capital. The William Temple Foundation suggests that the contribution of churches to communities can better be understood in the context of 'religious capital', the distinctive 'own brand of social capital' of churches. Like social capital, religious capital benefits individuals and the wider community but the 'underlying beliefs and motivations are distinctly 'church' based' (William Temple Foundation 2005, p.2).

Iannaccone coined the term 'religious capital' in the 1980s. For Iannaccone, the accumulation of religious capital is a by-product of religious activity. Its key features are that it enhances the usefulness of religious activity; it grows due to religious involvement; it is of most use in religious settings (where it was generated); and it is complementary with religious activities and capital of other family members (Iannaccone and Klick, 2003). The work of the William Temple Foundation suggests that religious capital is 'the combined total of a church's and/or other faith group's contribution to civil society and social capital, involving the interplay between values, language, method and theology which creates a dynamic and shifting product, some of which fits comfortably with other types of capital, some of which feels distinctly ill at ease and alienated from the mainstream' (William Temple Foundation, 2005 p.7).

Looking at religious capital as a channel of transferable social capital for the wider community, the William Temple Foundation studied how churches in Manchester are contributing to social capital in relation to changes taking place as a result of new forms of urbanisation and regeneration. The researchers point out that the churches are highly engaged in regeneration and social capital enterprises. Churches initiate community projects and are involved in partnerships with both faith-based and secular organisations. Furthermore, church members in the study expressed a commitment to

inclusivity, diversity and openness. Overall, the researchers conclude, churches make substantial contributions to wider society.

Research into the social capital of churches has found that church participation affects civic activity. According to Schwadel's (2005) findings, church participation increases civic activity, but only in liberal churches. Schwadel looked at the relationship between religion and civic participation in relation to 'conservative' religious beliefs. He found that congregations 'with a theological conservative climate' participate less in civic organisations. They are less active in non-religious services in church, and participate less in outside-of-church activities. This suggests that bridging social capital is less prominent in conservative churches. By contrast, Schwadel points out, 'liberal' churchgoers generate more bridging social capital demonstrated through their higher levels of involvement in both non-religious church activities and in outside-of-church activities.

To conclude this section, churches, faith groups and 'faith communities' are seen by a number of studies as a source of social capital, even if this is not as straightforward as the connection would imply. The next section presents a profile of Methodist congregations and looks at their views about the church and wider community in relation to demographic characteristics.

2. Methodist congregations

The 2001 Church Life Profile survey set out to examine how the experiences, opinions and attitudes of Christian churchgoers varied by denomination. As we saw earlier, findings revealed that caring for others and involvement in the community were especially important to Methodists.

Methodism dates back to the 1700s. It originated from the work of brothers John and Charles Wesley, priests in the Church of England. While working as missionaries in Georgia, USA, the brothers were affected by the faith and simple lifestyle of the Moravians, a religious group. On their return to England, the Wesley brothers began open-air preaching and quickly attracted followers. Towards the end of the eighteenth

century, as Methodists increased in number, constitutional disputes and fresh revivals resulted in members dividing into smaller groups. The current day Methodist church was formed when most of the smaller groups united and joined with the main body, the Wesleyans, in 1932.

Today there are approximately 6,000 Methodist churches throughout Great Britain. The Wesleyan stress on the values of evangelism, social concern and social justice, remain a key focus. The Methodist church is committed to Bible study, youth work, pastoral care and social outreach. It works closely with charitable organisations, including NCH, the children's charity, and is involved in campaigns for global social justice. The church aims to care for individuals, communities and the environment; to welcome diversity; to work alongside the poor; and to develop partnerships with other churches and groups with similar aims.

Research method

This report is based on a national survey of Methodist churches that took place in October 2005. The survey aimed to be representative of all Methodist congregations in England, Scotland and Wales. A stratified random sample was used for the survey. In order to ensure the sample included the proportionate amount of Methodist churches from different parts of Great Britain five regions were identified: the South East, the South West, Wales and West Midlands, Yorkshire and the North, and Lancashire and the East Midlands. Churches were then stratified by urban, suburban and rural location so that there was not an over or under representation of any one Methodist church location in the survey. Finally churches were stratified by congregation size before a random sample of fifty churches was taken. This sample size was considered adequate by comprising a large enough number of churchgoers (approximately 1500) across a broad range of Methodist churches. Forty-nine churches agreed to participate.

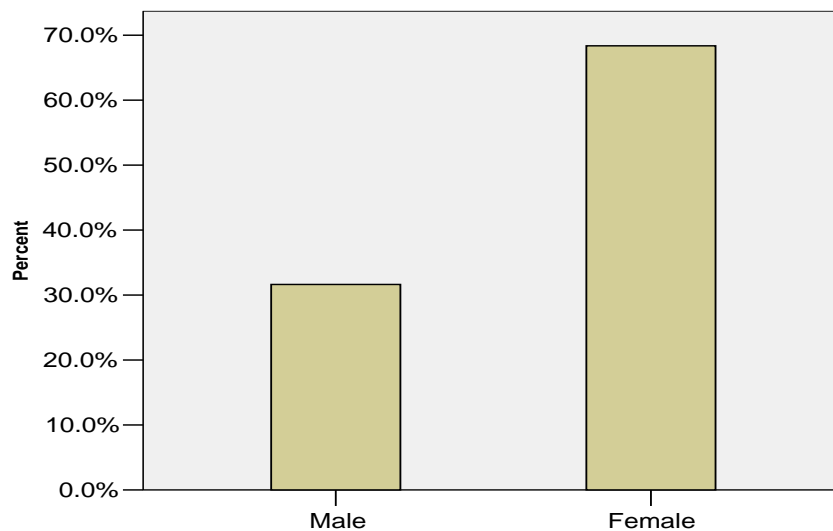
Questionnaire design was largely based on the social capital literature and research. This included using some of the standard social capital questions from the Office for National Statistics' social capital module. The survey incorporated questions about trust, networks, civic participation and volunteering. The survey was piloted with a

Methodist church in Surrey. On the day of the survey, around 1500 questionnaires were distributed amongst congregation members of participating churches. A response rate of approximately 70 per cent was achieved.³ (Further details of the methodology can be found in appendix 1.)

Who responded?

The profile of respondents provides an important insight into Methodist congregations. According to the 2001 Church Life survey, churchgoers are divided approximately into two thirds female to one third male. This corresponds with the data from this research that shows a larger proportion of female churchgoers (see figure 1). 68 per cent of respondents are female and 32 per cent male. It is consistent across all geographical regions and urban/rural locations of the survey.

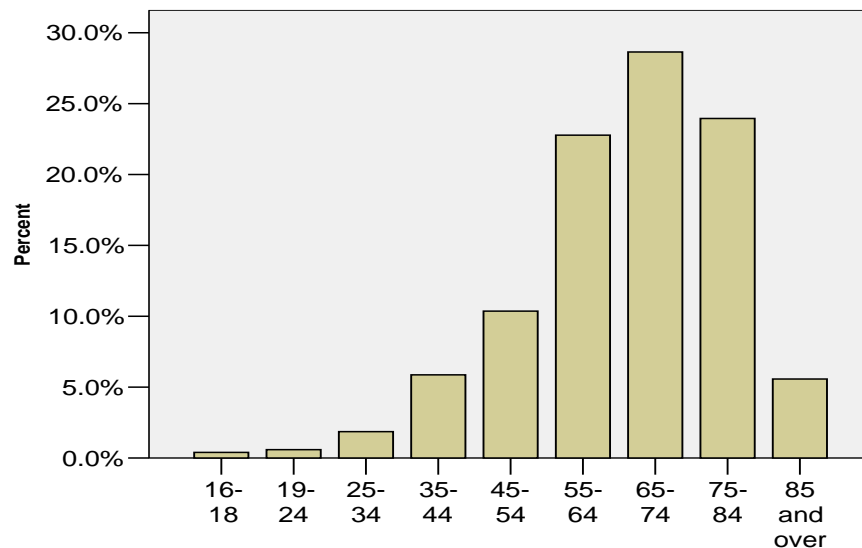
Figure 1: Gender profile



³ The survey response rate is approximate because we cannot be sure of the exact distribution numbers of questionnaires to Methodist congregation members.

The Church Life survey also found that while churchgoers have a higher age profile than the wider public, the age profile for Methodist churchgoers is higher still. Figure 2 below shows that nearly 80 per cent of our survey respondents are over the age of 55. This is higher than the Church Life Profile at 69 per cent, but otherwise, the age profile is similar between the two studies.

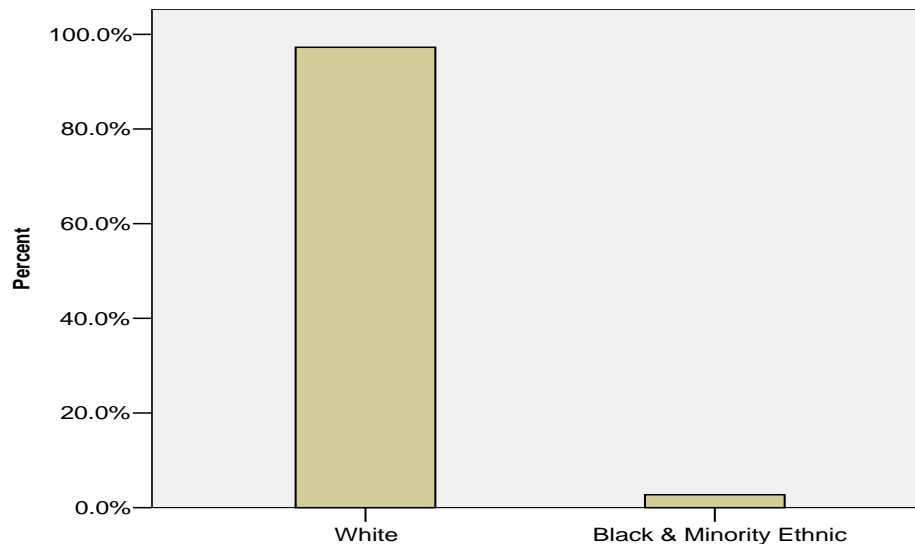
Figure 2: Age profile



Relatively few (10 per cent) of our survey respondents are under the age of 45. More respondents in the 65-74 age bracket attend church than any other age category. This age profile of Methodist congregations is a general finding: it remains consistent across all geographical regions and urban/rural locations of the survey.

Consistent with the findings of the Church Life Profile, 97 per cent of respondents identified themselves as white British, as figure 3 shows below.

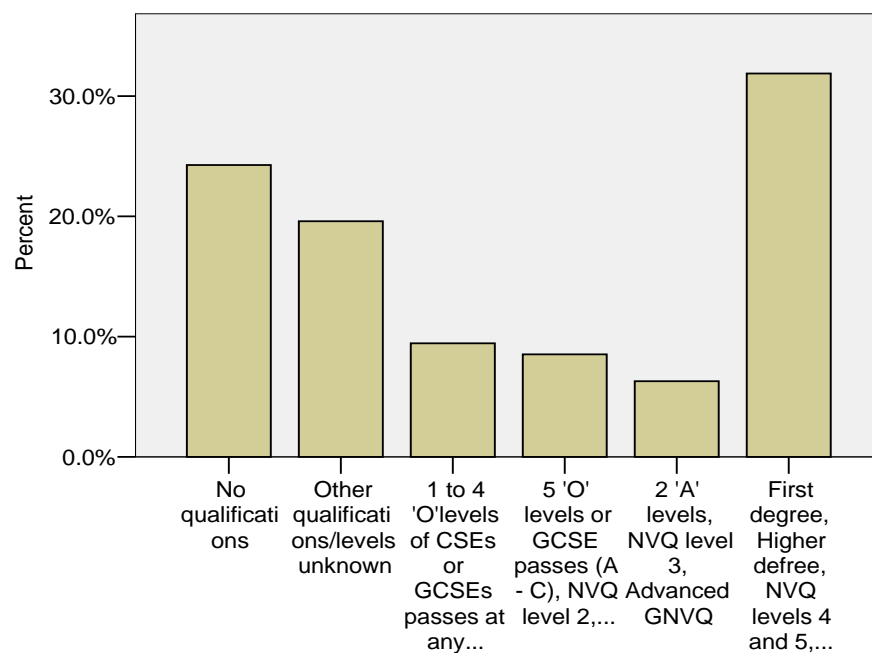
Figure 3: Ethnic profile



Of the 49 participating churches, 29 did not include any responses from black and minority ethnic (BME) congregation members. While it is likely that this is because there are no BME congregation members in these churches, it is also possible that BME congregation members did not participate in the survey. It is important to acknowledge there are more ethnically diverse Methodist congregations at a local level, for example within specific inner-city locations, which were not amongst those churches randomly selected for our research sample. Despite the low levels of responses from BME congregation members, some analysis by ethnicity has been possible.

Overall, the sample appears to be skewed in the direction of higher qualifications, as figure 5 shows. One third of the total number of respondents in the survey have a first degree or higher. This relatively high proportion may be explained by respondents with higher qualifications being more likely to complete the survey. It may also be explained by Methodist congregation members being more highly educated than the general population.

Figure 5: Education profile



Relative to the other regions, fewer respondents (24 per cent) from Wales and West Midlands hold a degree or higher qualification. In comparison to other regions, more respondents (36 per cent) in the South East hold a degree or higher qualification.

Respondents were asked how long they had been attending their church. 58 per cent of respondents have been attending their church for more than 20 years. This is a higher proportion than the Church Life Profile survey that found 45 per cent attended more than 20 years. 40 per cent of our survey respondents have been attending for 30 years or more. The relatively high percentage of long-term church attendance in our survey is likely linked to the age profile of respondents and how long they have lived in the area.

Figure 6: Church attendance

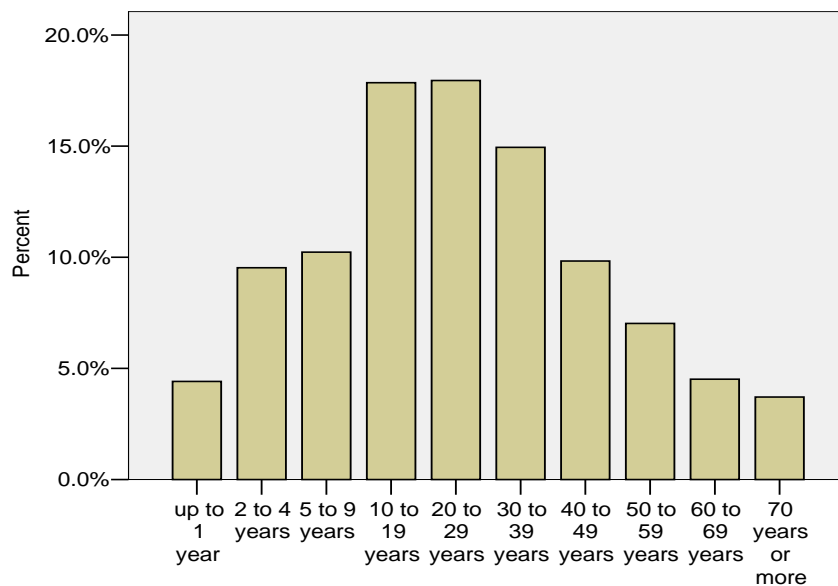


Figure 6 above shows that the length of attendance peaks at 10 to 29 years, with 36 per cent of respondents attending for this period of time. 24 per cent of respondents have been attending for less than 10 years; and attendance starts to decrease from 40 years upwards. 99 per cent of respondents attend church at least once a month, with 87 per cent attending at least once a week. The frequency of church attendance is linked to the age profile of respondents, how long they have lived in the area and how long they have been attending their church.

Attitudes to church and community

In order to assess what congregations thought about the contribution the church made to the community, the survey asked a series of questions about what they valued about their church and the work it was doing. The results from these questions were analysed by region and urban/rural location of church; and by gender, age, education and ethnicity of respondents.

Responses by region

The survey yielded proportionately fewer responses from Wales and West Midlands in comparison to the other regions. Overall, analyses show relatively few differences in the views of respondents between regions. Although differences that have emerged have not produced statistically significant results, some interesting findings concerning Wales and the West Midlands are highlighted below.

- Respondents from Wales and West Midlands tend not to be as positive about their church as respondents from other regions. They rate their church relatively less well in most features listed in the rating question (features are listed below).
- Respondents were asked about the relative importance of various church features. Methodists from Wales and West Midlands in particular tend to feel strongly about 'promoting social justice'. Half of respondents believe this is a very important feature of the church, which is the highest proportion of all the regions.
- Compared to other regions there was more support for the statement:

'The church does not do enough work in my local community'

Nearly half of respondents from Wales and West Midlands agreed with this.

Responses by location

Responses in general tend to be similar across urban, suburban and rural churches. Although findings are not statistically significant, as we move from rural to urban locations, findings show a slight increase of importance placed on:

‘Openness to all people irrespective of difference’

‘Openness to all people irrespective of difference’ is more important to urban congregations than to suburban and rural ones. It is difficult to know whether this is to do with the characteristics of inner-city churches and the likelihood of greater diversity within congregations.

The survey contained a series of Lickert-type statements designed to measure the attitudes of congregation members towards issues of tolerance and outward facing church-activities.

Differences in responses to attitude statements concern mainly rural congregations. Rural congregations more than urban and suburban ones tend to stress the importance of the spiritual dimension of the church and also its role of providing social support in the wider community. However, rural, suburban and urban congregations tend to share the view that contributing social support and welfare to the wider community is not as important as other features of the church.

Rural congregations also tend to believe, more so than suburban or urban congregations, that they can influence church-made decisions that affect both the church and the wider community. It is difficult to know whether this is to do with living in smaller communities that might better facilitate greater involvement.

Responses by gender

Results by gender seem to yield more significant relationships than most other background variables. Results of responses at a national level show that Methodist

congregations tend to view their church in a positive light. This is particularly the case for women:

- Women rate their church more highly than men in all church features in the rating questions.
- Women place greater importance than men on most ranking features of the church. This is especially the case for 'contributing to my sense of well-being'. Likewise women rank higher levels of importance on 'openness to all people', 'promoting social justice' and 'meeting people/making friends'.
- More women than men disagree with the attitude statements:

'There are certain types of people who the church should not associate with' and
'The church should only offer support to those groups who uphold the Christian faith'

- Women are more likely than men to stress the importance of the spiritual dimension of the church and also its role of providing social support in the wider community.
- More men than women feel their church does not do enough work in the local community. This might suggest a link between the lower participation of men in both church and non-church activities and the more negative view men have of their church's local community involvement.
- Women appear to be more involved in activities both inside and outside of the church than men. Their participation in public life tends to be more emotionally based; they are more likely to be involved in visiting people, helping with childcare and shopping and giving emotional support.
- Women are more likely to have a position in the church as a pastoral carer/visitor and to be involved in junior Sunday school.

- Men's participation tends to be in leading groups and committees, providing transport/running errands and giving domestic help. Their church role is more likely to be a steward or committee member.

Responses by age

Age also had some impact on the survey results. As we have seen, Methodist congregations tend to comprise relatively few young churchgoers. However, age was a factor regarding some of the responses. Responses to how well churches were rated on features and to the attitude statements, show that the older a respondent the more likely they are to view the life of the church in a positive way. Across all age groups, the majority of respondents disagree with the attitude statement:

'The church should only offer support to those groups who uphold the Christian faith'

In terms of *strength* of feeling, the younger respondents are, the more strongly they feel about this. Similarly younger respondents tend to disagree more strongly with the attitude statement:

'There are certain types of people who the church should not associate with'

Although 'openness to all people' was ranked by all age groups as the most important feature of their church (discussed below), it was viewed as particularly important by younger respondents. The older they are, the more likely respondents are to agree that the church's primary role is to provide social support in the local community, a view that could be linked to their understanding of older people's needs for social assistance.

Whereas older respondents seem to attend church services and fellowship groups more frequently than respondents under the age of 45, they are involved less than younger respondents in Bible study groups and choir/music groups. Older respondents are more

likely to attend groups for older people and less likely to attend groups for children/young people and family groups.

Older respondents are more involved in visiting others but less likely to have given or received emotional support; giving emotional support is associated more with the 45 to 54 age group. Receiving visits and help with shopping and transport increases with age. Overall, however, the older a respondent is, the less involved they are both in the life of the church and the life of the community.

Responses by education

There were no significant relationships between educational qualifications and (a) how well overall respondents rated their church on different features and (b) how important they considered each of these features to be. However, there is a relationship between educational attainment and how respondents' ranked the importance of 'openness to all people' within their church. Respondents with the highest qualifications were most likely to rank 'openness to all people' as an important feature of the church. Furthermore their strength of feeling was greater: more felt this was *very important*. They also more strongly disagreed with the attitude statement:

'The church should only offer support to those groups who uphold the Christian faith'

Respondents with a first degree or higher tend to view their church less positively where community work is concerned. They are more of the opinion that their church does not do enough work in the local community. The higher a respondent's qualifications the less likely they are to agree that:

'The primary role of the church is to provide social support in the local community'

Respondents with lower qualifications are more likely to be involved in charitable organisations and to participate in groups for older people. Respondents with higher qualifications are more likely to be involved in leading a group/being a member of a

committee, organising/helping run an activity, and giving help teaching/coaching and advice/counselling. Giving advice/counselling or emotional support was least associated with respondents with no qualifications.

Responses by ethnicity

Differences in responses between white and BME respondents must be treated with caution. We hoped to carry out an analysis of BME congregations but this was not possible because BME respondents are thinly spread across churches, that is, none of the participating churches had a majority of BME respondents. Claims presented here based on the results from our analyses are tentative because of the relatively few responses from BME congregation members.

It appears that generally white and BME respondents share similar views of their church, but BME respondents' attitudes are stronger. BME respondents disagree more strongly with the statements:

'The church should only offer support to those groups who uphold the Christian faith'

'There are certain types of people who the church should not associate with'

BME respondents agree more strongly that:

'Even if I object to someone's lifestyle, my church should still welcome them'

White respondents have a more negative view of their church's work in the local community. They are more likely to agree with the statement:

'The church does not do enough work in my local community'

There was little difference between how white and BME respondents ranked various features of their church or how they rated their church on these features. However,

white respondents rate their church better than BME respondents at 'promoting social justice'.

Overall, most findings are consistent across Methodist churches although there are, as we have seen, some variations in responses by age, gender and education of congregation members.

Attitudes and beliefs

We now investigate congregations' views about their church. We look at levels of importance respondents place on certain features of the church and how well they rate their churches in them. Respondents were invited to both rank these features (in terms of which they believed were relatively more important than others) and rate them (in terms of how well they believed their church demonstrated these characteristics). The list below shows the order of how highly rated they were.

1. Being part of a group
2. Sharing support/help with other church people
3. Meeting people/making friends
4. Openness to all people irrespective of difference
5. Contributing to my sense of wellbeing
6. Contributing facilities, amenities and activities to the wider community
6. Activities for members
8. Promoting social justice
9. Contributing social support to the wider community
10. Contributing welfare services to the wider community

The majority of respondents rate their church highly in most features. However, as the list shows, churches are, on the whole, rated better in church-focused features than community-focused ones.

An interesting finding is that relative to other features, churches are rated less well in 'promoting social justice' and also, albeit to a less degree, 'openness to all people

irrespective of difference', the two features which are the most important to respondents. Congregations' ranking and rating responses are discussed in more detail below in the next section.

We now examine the responses of congregations within the framework of social capital theory to further consider the difference churches make to communities through congregations' social activity.

3. Social capital and Methodist congregations

This section investigates the social capital of Methodist churches in two parts. The first part explores the involvement of congregations in community activities and their participation particularly in relation to social capital. We begin by looking at the issue of trust in Methodist church congregations and then examine their perceptions about whether they can influence decisions that affect both the church community and the wider community. We then look at the involvement of congregations in different types of community activity including civic participation, social activity and volunteering, and compare where appropriate, our findings with those from the Home Office Citizenship Surveys.

Our results make interesting comparisons with findings from the Citizenship Surveys and during this section we highlight these. Many of the social capital questions used in the Methodist survey and the Citizenship Surveys were similar if not the same. However, we are mindful that the age and education profile of respondents in the Methodist survey is different to the wider population of the Citizenship Surveys. The Methodist sample population is older and has higher educational qualifications than the population at large. While we are confident our sample is representative of Methodist congregations, it is important to acknowledge the complexities associated with comparing the sets of findings because of the demographic differences between them.

Still using the concept of social capital, the second part of this section focuses on the 'inward' and 'outward' facing orientation of congregations. Here we begin by looking once again at congregations' attitudes and beliefs, and then examine their views about

how important specific church features are and how well churches are rated in these features.

Trust

The survey explored levels of trust in Methodist churchgoers in the light of the literature linking trust and social activity. The survey looked at two dimensions of churchgoers' trust in other people. Respondents were asked about trust in people in their neighbourhood and trust in people generally, that is, in people unknown and unfamiliar to them. Some of the trust patterns might not be surprising. Overall, greater levels of neighbourhood and general trust were associated with (a) greater satisfaction with the area in which respondents live, (b) the more people in the neighbourhood known to respondents, and (c) neighbours 'looking out' for each other.

Respondents were asked whether they could trust most people, some people, a few people or no one. 73 per cent of respondents reported trusting most people in their neighbourhood compared with 51 per cent of respondents who felt most people generally could be trusted. This considerably higher rate of neighbourhood trust could be affected by a number of factors, for example, people in the neighbourhood being familiar (if not known personally) to respondents. It may also be affected by similarities respondents perceive there to be between themselves and people in their neighbourhood. The difference between neighbourhood and general trust reduces however, when responses to trusting *some* people are taken into account. Combined responses to trust in most people and trust in some people, increase to 95 per cent in levels of neighbourhood trust, and to 94 per cent in levels of general trust. The Home Office Citizenship 2003 Survey looked at religion and people's levels of trust and community activity. It found that religion showed a consistent relationship with the outcome variables trust, formal volunteering (see below) and civic participation (see below). People who hold religious beliefs are more likely to be trustful, to formally volunteer and to participate in civic activities.

Although our findings indicate relatively high levels of trust, we cannot claim that the Methodists in our survey are more trustful than the wider population; existing data does

not allow us to make these comparisons. However, consistent with other research (e.g., Home Office Citizenship Surveys 2001 and 2003; Fukuyama, 2000; Putnam, 2000) our findings show that trust is a key indicator of involvement in various social activities, and Methodists do appear more active than the wider population (discussed below). Greater community involvement is significantly linked with higher levels of trust. Furthermore, Methodists with higher levels of trust are more likely to believe they can influence decisions in their church and wider community, which might in turn affect the extent and nature of their social activity.

Statistical analysis using correlations showed the key personal characteristics shaping Methodist congregations' trust. Age and educational qualifications were found to be significant factors. The older respondents are, the more trusting of other people they are both in their neighbourhood and in general. Respondents with higher educational qualifications are more likely to believe that most people in general can be trusted compared to respondents with lower educational qualifications.

The urban/rural location of churches also had an impact on levels of trust in respondents. As we move from urban to rural churches, we see a significant increase in levels of both neighbourhood and general trust. Rural congregations are the most trusting, followed by suburban and then urban congregations. Whereas we might expect to find greater levels of trust in smaller church communities, this is not the case: the highest proportion of smaller congregations is in urban churches and congregations in urban churches are the least trusting. However, congregations in rural churches also tend to be older than congregations in suburban and urban churches and older respondents tend to have greater levels of trust. This might in part explain the greater levels of trust found in rural churches.

Consistent with the Citizenship Survey, our findings show that trust is a key indicator of the social activities engaged in by respondents. The higher levels of trust respondents have, the more likely they are to have taken action to solve a local problem and the more formal and informal voluntary work they have been involved in. Respondents with higher levels of trust are also more likely to believe they can influence decisions in their

church and wider community. This belief might in turn encourage them to become more involved in that community.

Influencing decisions

Prior to examining social activities it is useful to look at the extent to which church members believe they can influence decisions that affect the church or the wider community. This is of interest because findings from the Home Office Citizenship Surveys show that belief in the ability to affect decision-making is associated with civic participation. By comparing our survey findings to results of the 2001 Citizenship Survey we can consider the extent to which being part of a Methodist congregation might be associated with respondents' beliefs about being able to influence decisions affecting their area. The majority of our respondents (75 per cent) felt they could influence decisions in their church community and 59 per cent of respondents felt they could influence decisions in the wider community. The Citizenship Survey found that 45 per cent of people with no religious affiliation believed they could influence decisions affecting their area compared with 43 per cent of respondents from all faith communities and 42 per cent of Christians. These results indicate notable differences between each of the Citizenship Survey's findings and the Methodist respondents in our survey. In each case Methodists appear to have greater beliefs they can influence decisions that affect their local community. However, these claims are tentative because of differences in wording between the two surveys that may have some bearing on the results. For example, our comparisons are made between what the Methodist survey refers to as the 'wider community' and what the Citizenship Survey refers to as 'local area'.

Methodist churchgoers' responses did not vary significantly when sex and education were taken into account; however, the older respondents are the more they believe they can affect wider community decisions. It is unclear whether Methodists' religious involvement fuels their beliefs about influencing community decisions, or whether people who already possess these beliefs are more likely to be involved in religious activity. What is clear from the findings, however, is that Methodist respondents' beliefs that they can affect church and wider community decisions correlate significantly with higher levels of social activity. The findings reveal significant associations between perceptions

about influencing church and wider community decision-making processes and (a) levels of neighbourhood trust; (b) action respondents have taken to solve a local problem; and (c) voluntary work respondents have been involved in.

Civic participation

To find out about involvement in civic activities, the survey asked respondents if they had taken any action to solve a problem in their local area. The term 'taken any action' included activities such as contacting a local radio, TV station or newspaper, contacting a local councillor or MP, attending a meeting or residents' group, and signing a petition.

63 per cent of respondents had been involved in at least one of the activities during the last twelve months. This is a substantially higher figure than national averages according to the Home Office 2005 Citizenship Survey that found 39 per cent of people had taken part in civic activities. Our analysis showed that there were no significant associations with action taken and age or gender, that is, neither of these demographic characteristics impacted upon whether respondents had taken any action. Educational attainment however, was an influencing factor: the higher respondents' qualifications the more action they had taken. Respondents' participation in civic activities was also significantly linked with higher levels of:

- Beliefs they can influence church community and wider community decisions
- Neighbourhood trust
- Giving unpaid help to social activities
- Giving informal voluntary help
- Receiving informal voluntary help

The number of actions respondents had taken to solve a local problem increased with beliefs that they could influence decisions about their church and wider community. This raises the issue of whether the experience of having taken action over an issue concerning the local area impacts on respondents' beliefs about influencing church and community decisions, or whether respondents' beliefs that they can influence decisions prompts them to take action.

Involvement in activities

Respondents were asked about the sorts of activities they might have participated in during the last 12 months, both connected and unconnected to their church.

Understandably the highest involvement in church-related activities was with church services, fellowship groups and bible study groups respectively. Roles of respondents in their church tended to be mostly as church members, followed by committee members, stewards, pastoral carers/visitors and Sunday school/junior church helpers.

In terms of non-church activities, hobbies/social groups and sports/exercise groups yielded the highest number of participating respondents. More than half of respondents reported taking part in hobbies or social groups at least once every three months. Otherwise, response patterns were similar between church and non-church activities. In both there were higher levels of involvement in groups for older people, choir/music groups and charitable organisations than in other activities. Respondents were least likely to have participated in political groups, relationship groups, parents and pre-school groups, and environmental groups.

Although there appeared to be greater involvement overall in activities outside of the church (with the exception of those church activities mentioned above), it is important to remain mindful that this is likely because an extensive range of activities would not be available in many churches.

Volunteering

The survey asked a range of questions about various voluntary activities that respondents may have been involved in. One area of questioning referred to the type of unpaid formal help respondents may have given to social activities they participated in. The term 'formal help' refers to help given through organised social groups, clubs or activities. Formal help includes helping to raise money, being a committee member, helping to run an event, representing, campaigning, visiting or befriending people, giving advice and providing transport. The question was asked in relation to church related

social activities and to non-church related social activities. During analysis, responses to help given to church and non-church social activities were combined because patterns of responses were similar between the two. A combined measure also provides an overall picture of the extent to which congregations are involved in giving help to the activities in which they participate.

The vast majority (93 per cent) of respondents reported having given unpaid formal help during the last twelve months. This is a substantially higher figure than the early findings of the 2005 Citizenship Survey which showed that 44 per cent of people had volunteered formally at least once in the last twelve months. Again, findings from the Methodist survey show that age had no impact but educational attainment did. The higher respondents' qualifications, the more unpaid help they had given. Giving help was also significantly associated to respondents' beliefs they can influence decisions taken in the church and wider community, and with 'outward facing' attitudes.

Informal unpaid help refers to help given and received as an individual, that is, not through a group, club or organisation. The sorts of help referred to included domestic work, provision of transport, running errands, babysitting, practical advice, emotional support, visiting and shopping. 80 per cent of respondents had given help in the last twelve months and 32 per cent had received help. Early findings from the 2005 Citizenship Survey suggest that 68 per cent of the population at large volunteered informally at least once in the last twelve months. Although this difference is not as great as the difference between the two surveys in results for formal volunteering shown above, these findings indicate Methodists are more active than the population at large where volunteering is concerned. However, suggestions in differences are made tentatively because as outlined at the beginning of this section, comparisons with other studies should be made with caution. Even slight differences to the way in which people's activities have been measured could influence the results.

Age significantly impacted on help given and received in the Methodist survey. Perhaps unsurprisingly, as age increases, the more help respondents have received and the less help they have given. Educational attainment was also found to be a significant factor in responses. The higher their qualifications the more help respondents had given. This

finding is consistent with the 2001 Home Office Citizenship survey that found that people who had the highest levels of education were more likely to be involved in all types of voluntary activity.

Giving informal unpaid help is also significantly linked with:

- Respondents' beliefs they can influence church community and wider community decisions
- General trust
- Giving unpaid help to social activities
- Civic participation
- Inward and outward-facing attitudes

Receiving informal help is significantly linked with higher levels of:

- Beliefs they can influence wider community decisions
- Neighbourhood trust
- Giving unpaid help to social activities
- Civic participation
- Inward and outward-facing attitudes

Inward and outward-facing attitudes and beliefs

As we saw in section 2, the survey explored the attitudes of congregations. This was particularly in terms of how congregations valued their church; how important they believed certain church features to be; and what their views were of the church's role and work for non-members as well as congregation members. In this section, we look again at congregations' attitudes and views about their church, only this time we think about what responses mean in terms of social capital and the difference that churches might be making to communities.

The survey contained a series of Lickert-type statements designed to measure the attitudes and beliefs of congregation members towards issues of tolerance and what

could be thought of as the inward and outward facing orientation of congregations. Inward facing refers to attitudes and beliefs that could be considered bonding in nature, that is, 'in-church' focused. Outward facing refers to bridging or 'outside-of-church' and wider community focused.

The findings revealed that the attitudes of congregations are both inward and outward facing. In terms of inward facing attitudes, more than a half of respondents agreed that they make most of their friends through the church. Furthermore the majority of respondents (65 per cent) agreed that they would turn to someone from their church first if they needed emotional support. This was particularly the case for older congregation members.

Responses to other statements showed distinct outward-facing attitudes. The vast majority (96 per cent) of respondents agreed with the statement:

'Even if I object to someone's lifestyle, my church should still welcome them'

Responses showed no significant differences by other variables such as congregations' age and education, or by churches' urban/rural location, indicating this is a consistent outward-facing attitude held within Methodist congregations irrespective of individual congregational characteristics.

The vast majority of respondents disagreed with the statement:

'There are certain types of people the church should not associate with'

The higher respondents' educational qualifications, the more they disagreed that:

'The church should only offer support to those groups who uphold the Christian faith'

Only 9 per cent of respondents agreed with this statement. Those who agreed were more likely to be older congregation members.

Most respondents (72 per cent) disagreed that:

‘The church should put the wellbeing of its members before that of others’

Again the older a respondent the more likely they were to agree with the statement.

Based on responses to statements, the findings show that, overall, older congregation members have more inward-facing attitudes. This suggests their social capital is more bonding in nature than bridging.

More than one third of respondents agreed with the statement:

‘The church does not do enough work in my local community’

This statement is neither inward nor outward facing, however, it is possible that respondents who agreed with the statement might feel the church could do more work in the community. In this sense, their views could be considered outward facing. Respondents who agreed with this statement were more likely to be male and have higher educational qualifications than the remaining two-thirds of respondents.

A half of respondents showed an outward facing view of their church’s role. They agreed that:

‘The primary role of the church is to provide social support in the local community’

Those who disagree with the statement are more likely to be people with higher qualifications; men; and congregations in rural locations.

The ‘social theme’ of the church, however, does not take precedence where the spiritual aspect of the church is concerned. The vast majority of respondents agreed that:

‘The social role of the church should not take precedence over the spiritual’

Significant associations were found between outward-facing attitudes and: (a) the more action respondents had taken to solve a problem in their local area; (b) the more unpaid help respondents had given to activities they were involved in; and (c) the more informal unpaid help respondents had given. This set of findings also reveals a significant relationship between attitudes and trust. Respondents with greater levels of trust are more outward facing in their attitudes and views about the church and the wider community.

Inward-facing attitudes are also significantly linked with informal unpaid help given. The more informal help given, the more likely respondents are to turn to a church friend for emotional and practical support. It could be the case that the recipients of respondents' help are other church people to whom respondents feel they could turn in times of need. On the other hand it may be the case that respondents' informal help is given to non-church people also. This is a realistic possibility given that there are a greater number of respondents who report giving help than those who report receiving help.

Ranking and Rating church features

We have already looked at congregations' views of their church in terms of how important they feel certain features of the church are, and how well they rate their church in them. The list of features also aimed to represent the 'inward' and 'outward' facing characteristics of their church and it is this theme to which we now turn. As we have seen, Methodist congregations have a positive view of their church. They consider all features important and rate their church well in them. However, respondents rated their church better in the inward-facing features than the outward-facing ones. Inward-facing features refer to 'sharing support/help with other church people'; 'meeting people/making friends'; 'being part of a group'; 'activities for members'; and 'contributing to own sense of wellbeing'. Outward-facing features include 'openness to all people irrespective of difference'; 'promoting social justice'; 'contributing facilities, amenities and activities to the wider community'; 'contributing social support to the wider community'; and 'contributing welfare services to the wider community'.

Responses to levels of importance of features were collated and results are shown below in order of their importance to congregations:

1. Openness to all people irrespective of difference
2. Promoting social justice
3. Sharing support/help with other church people
4. Meeting people/making friends
5. Being part of a group
6. Contributing facilities, amenities and activities to the wider community
7. Activities for members
8. Contributing social support to the wider community
9. Contributing welfare services to the wider community
10. Contributing to own sense of wellbeing

The findings show variation in the order of importance of features in terms of their inward and outward facing character. The two most important features to congregations are both outward facing: 'openness to all people irrespective of difference' and 'promoting social justice'. Overall, churches were rated highly. However, there is an interesting difference in how respondents rated the activities of their church and what they believed the church should be doing. Overall, they believed the church was doing a better job on the inward facing features but that these were less important than the outward facing ones. More than a half of respondents feel 'openness to all people irrespective of difference' is a very important aspect of the church. A similar response was yielded for 'promoting social justice'. It is important to emphasise that all features of the church were considered important as opposed to unimportant and that the results reflect responses that are relative only to one another. A noteworthy finding, however, is that contributions to the wider community appear relatively low in terms of how important congregations feel these aspects of the church are. Moreover, relative to other features, congregations tend to rate their churches less well where contributions to the wider community are concerned. These findings are especially interesting given that we have seen (a) half of respondents agree that the primary role of the church is to provide social support in the local community, and (b) more than a third of respondents are of the opinion that the church does not do enough work in their local community.

Age of respondents did not significantly affect the level of importance of church features, but in terms of education, the higher respondents' educational qualifications, the greater importance they placed on 'openness to all people irrespective of difference'.

Higher levels of importance placed on outward-facing church features were significantly associated with: (a) the more action respondents had taken to solve a problem in their local area; (b) the more unpaid help respondents had given to activities they were involved in; and (c) the more informal unpaid help respondents had given. Findings show that informal unpaid help given is also significantly linked with some inward-facing attitudes, for example the more informal help they had given, the more important it was to respondents to (a) share support/help with other church people and (b) feel part of a group through attending church.

4. Making a difference? Social capital and the Methodist church

The aim of this research was to assess Methodist church congregations' views about their church and the contributions of congregations to the wider community. To help do this we have used Putnam's distinction between bridging and bonding social capital as a means of establishing the inward and outward facing attitudes and activities of congregations.

A noteworthy finding concerns Methodist congregations' attitudes and beliefs. It is the case that in general respondents have a positive view of their church. They consider all features of the church important and the majority of respondents rate their church highly in most. However, one third of respondents feel their church does not do enough work in the local community. This group were more likely to be male and have higher educational qualifications than the remaining two-thirds of respondents. Relative to other features of the church, respondents do not feel contributing social support, welfare, and facilities is as important, and yet half of respondents feel that the primary role of the church is to provide social support in the local community. In light of these findings it is possible that Methodist congregations view other types of work in the community important, an issue that raises questions about the sort of work in the

community that some members of congregations feel the church could or should be doing.

Our findings indicate that overall Methodist congregations have relatively high stocks of social capital. In some types of activity, for example, civic participation and volunteering it appears they may be more active than the population at large. They also appear to have a greater tendency to believe they can influence decisions that affect their area. Findings are consistent with the theory of social capital in particular regarding associations between different types of community activity. Involvement in one activity is linked with involvement in others. Trust, perceptions about influencing decisions, civic participation and volunteering of Methodist congregations are intertwined. Beliefs about the community and one's place in the community are linked to levels of participation.

Methodist congregations are overall trustful of others. The research results show relatively high levels of trust, although we cannot be sure their trust is greater than the wider population. However, we have seen that trust and involvement in a variety of activities are positively correlated (not only in our findings but from other research also) so that where levels are high in one variable, they will also be high in the other. On this premise, and as Methodist congregations appear more active, it is reasonable to assume that they are more trustful than the wider population. But does their community involvement create high levels of trust in Methodists or is it the case that Methodists are more involved in their communities because they have high levels of trust to begin with? We cannot be sure of the causal direction of this finding.

Undoubtedly our research findings raise further questions about the life of the Methodist church. What is it that makes congregations so active in communities? How can the extent and nature of their community involvement and their attitudes be explained? How far can Putnam's concept of bridging and bonding social capital explain the social capital of Methodist churches?

In some respects the social capital of the Methodist church fits Putnam's bonding social capital. Church congregations may be thought of as homogeneous groups. Not only do

they share similar beliefs where religion is concerned, but also the data shows considerable similarities in certain demographic characteristics of Methodist congregation members, for example age and ethnicity. Also a substantial proportion of respondents reported most of their friends are made through the church and that they would turn to a church friend first for emotional support. Furthermore it is the case that churches seem better at the inward-facing features, for example, making members feel part of a group and sharing help/support, than the outward facing ones, a finding which demonstrates what Flint and Kearns (2003) refer to as a 'member orientated' or inward focus of churches.

In other respects the social capital of the Methodist church might be described as bridging. Congregations' attitudes concerning people outside of the Methodist church indicate care for and open-mindedness towards the wider community. In addition, their views on how important certain features of the church are reveal a leaning towards placing others' needs before their own, for example, 'openness to all people irrespective of difference' and 'promoting social justice' were considered very important aspects of the church compared with their own 'sense of wellbeing' and 'activities for church members'. In terms of Methodist congregations' volunteering, it appears the recipients of their voluntary activities are not only other church people but also people outside of the church community. Support of the wider community is also demonstrated through their involvement in 'formal' activities such as charitable organisations and local neighbourhood groups.

Findings show variations - by age and education in particular - in terms of bridging and bonding social capital. Older churchgoers' social capital is more bonding in nature: they hold more inward-facing attitudes and beliefs than younger congregation members and more of their activity is church-related. Higher educational qualifications are associated with bridging social capital: there are significant relationships between higher qualifications and greater generalised trust, greater civic participation, voluntary work and outward-facing attitudes and beliefs. Collectively, results support those from Flint and Kearns' study of Scottish churches: Methodist congregations' activities reflect both inward and outward-facing social capital.

It would be a misconception, then, to claim that the social capital of Methodist churches is inward-facing (bonding) or outward-facing (bridging). Perhaps a fairer assessment would suggest that bridging and bonding social capital coexist in the Methodist Church. As Putnam points out, whereas bridging and bonding social capital are not interchangeable (i.e., the same) they can nonetheless operate together from within the same organisation; bridging and bonding social capital are not necessarily “either/or”.

Methodist congregations seem relatively active in communities, a point that Putnam emphasises about churchgoers. Methodist churches appear to make valuable contributions to local communities through the activities of individual congregation members and not necessarily through ‘church-labelled’ activities, a finding that mirrors Flint and Kearns’ study of Scottish church congregations. However, this is not to say that church-labelled activities are not a valuable and valued source of community support. Their community activities - whether participation in civic matters or volunteering roles - bring Methodist congregation members into contact with people who are different, which in turn can establish important bridging links between themselves and others, between the church and others, and among different individuals both inside and outside of the church. Is the concept religious capital a more useful means than social capital of understanding what we see happening in the lives of congregation members? It is clear from this study that religious belief fuels the underlying motivations and actions of congregation members.

High levels of community activity in Methodist churchgoers might be expected based on Schwadel’s (2003) theory that ‘liberal’ congregations are more involved in civic participation than ‘conservative’ congregations. We are unable to claim Methodist churchgoers are more active in the community than conservative churches because our research did not set out to investigate the community involvement of conservative churches with which to compare Methodist congregations. By Schwadel’s definition and taking into account results of previous research of Methodist congregations (for example, The Church Life Profile Study, 2001), Methodists may justifiably be placed into the ‘liberal’ category. Fukuyama (1996) points out that some religious affiliations are ‘less strict’. He suggests that the stronger the community’s ties (i.e., the more ‘strict’), the weaker its external bonds with those on the outside. If Methodists are ‘less strict’

and more 'liberal' than this might in part explain the extent and nature of their community involvement.

At the beginning of this report we highlighted the increasing emphasis in public policy on the role of churches and other faith organisations in strengthening communities. For example, commentators such as Flint and Kearns (2004) and Harris (1998) stress the role that churches can play in the delivery of public services and community regeneration. Our research tends to show that Methodist members are indeed more likely than non-members to contribute to the lives of their communities. However, this contribution tends to be less formal, more independent of and more spontaneous than formal or more organised welfare. As Harris points out, churches are better at informal community support than other more formal types of welfare delivery. The attraction to policy makers of placing the church and other faith organisations at the centre of community is understandable. However, concerns remain that the formalisation through state intervention of the work of churches and other faith groups in the community may have a detrimental effect on the very thing that makes them unique and valuable.

What kind of work should churches do in the community? A key feature of Methodist congregations is their belief in social justice and openness to all. Such beliefs underline their outward looking concerns. At the same time there is an acknowledgement that the inward facing dimensions of the church, such as providing fellowship and mutual support are equally strong. Indeed, it is the strength of these inward relationships that makes possible the engagement of congregations members with the community. To be on the inside of the church (a member of a Methodist congregation) presupposes an engagement with the outside (the community). To be inside is at one and the same time to be engaged with the outside.

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Appendix 1: Further details on research method

The sample design was aimed at being representative of all Methodist congregations across Great Britain. It is possible that different characteristics of churches, for example size, urban-rural location, might affect research findings. A process of stratification was therefore carried out to ensure that the sample included different types of Methodist church. Churches were organised by region, location and church membership size. In this way, under or over representation of any one category was less likely to occur. A stratified random sample was taken of fifty churches.

Ministers of the identified churches were contacted and invited to participate in the research. Follow-up communication was an important aspect because it enabled the flow of information required between the researchers and the churches. Details about individual churches were noted, for example, number of Sunday services held on a given day and dates of 'special' Sunday services. A 'normal' Sunday on which the survey could take place was identified and agreed. It was important to avoid 'special' Sundays, for example, Harvest Festival Sundays and services which included Baptisms because the research was concerned with 'typical' Methodist congregations from the participating churches and not, for instance, congregations that were largely made up of visitors to the church.

Questionnaire design was largely based on literature about social capital and previous research carried out in this area. Some of the questions used were taken from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) framework of measuring social capital. It is anticipated that comparisons of levels and types of social capital will be made at a later date between Methodist churchgoers and the general public. The survey included questions about trust, networks, civic participation, social activities and volunteering. The questionnaire was piloted with a large church in the South East and amendments were subsequently made. These included changes to wording, question order and response categories.

Approximately 1,500 questionnaires were handed out to congregations on the day of the survey. Based on questionnaire returns, we can be reasonably confident that a 70%

response rate was achieved. The average response rate to a postal survey is 20 - 25%. It is important to note that the relatively high response is likely in part due to the efforts of ministers who not only 'pre-warned' congregations in advance about the survey, stressing the value of their participation but also reminded congregations two weeks after the survey to return their questionnaires. Also it is reasonable to assume that people are more likely to respond to surveys about matters that concern them, that is, in this case, Methodist congregations' interest in research about Methodist churches.

