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## **The Community Involvement of Church Attenders: Findings from the English 2001 Church Life Profile**

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### **Introduction**

Despite being one of the most common forms of community involvement in the UK, attending church has received surprisingly little research attention. This paper introduces a large dataset that was gathered to help local churches shape their mission but which also contains a wealth of material of interest to academic researchers.

The English 2001 Church Life Profile has been undertaken by an organisation called Churches Information for Mission, which is a charitable company with members from the five main Protestant denominations in England and a number of para-church agencies. The English Profile builds upon work undertaken in Australia in 1991 and 1996. In 2001, the Profile was undertaken in Australia, New Zealand, the US and England. The Profiles in these four countries contain a core of common questions (making international comparisons possible) and also questions tailored to national circumstances. The patterns of church affiliation in the UK are complex with England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland having different denominational make ups with some denominations covering all four countries (for example, The Salvation Army) and some denominations covering just one country (for example, the Church of Scotland). This meant that it was more practical to focus the Profile on England but with UK-wide denominations extending their sample into the rest of the UK.

The key product of the Profile is a customised report that is sent to each congregation that took part. These reports will allow the congregations to reflect upon the attitudes and activities of their attenders and then take action to shape their mission and increase their vitality. The reports contain four sections focusing on the demographics of the congregation, attitudes to spiritual life, involvement in church life and involvement in the community. The rationale for the whole exercise then, comes from its practitioner base and intended use by clergy and church members.

The purpose of this paper is to take a preliminary 'academic' look at the data on community involvement. The aim will be to see whether those church attenders who describe themselves as being active in the community have any particular characteristics. Three elements of the questionnaire completed by adult attenders will be used to do this:

1. Whether the respondent holds a position of responsibility in the community
2. Whether the respondent is involved in church-based social action
3. Whether the respondent is involved in social action outside the church

These data are drawn from:

Churches Information for Mission (2001). *Faith in Life*. London, Churches Information for Mission.

Escott, P. and A. Gelder (2002). *Christians: Citizens and Consumers*. London, Churches Information for Mission.

And a briefing paper supplied by Phillip Escott

The next section reviews the literature that contextualises the community involvement of church attenders. This is followed by a brief methodology section. Data are presented which first of all compare church attenders with the UK population at large and then the three forms of community involvement are compared using seven variables. The discussion highlights some demographic, human capital and social capital themes that emerge and the conclusions seek to link these themes back to the literature.

### **Literature review**

There are three main areas of literature that take an interest in the community involvement of church members. First, the literatures on the social action or community service of congregations. Second, the literature on volunteering and third, the literature on social capital. Each takes a somewhat different perspective and I will seek in the conclusion to link the data back to these perspectives. As an English speaker, I am drawing on literature from the UK and US. It will be important to note the different cultural location of church members in the two societies.

#### *Social action literature*

The literature on the community involvement of congregations has grown dramatically as the policy context for welfare provision has shifted in both the US and the UK.

The introduction of charitable choice legislation in the US in 1996 increased the opportunity for congregations to receive state funding for their welfare programs. Further impetus was given, when George W Bush, set up the Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives when he came into office. Whilst significant sums of state funding have yet to be delegated to congregations, these policy shifts brought the welfare role of congregations into the mainstream of academic debate (Cnaan 1997; Wineburg 1997; Campbell 2002).

The assumption that congregations as possessors of buildings, money, volunteers and an ethic of concern are suitable providers of state funded services has proved controversial due to the constitutional separation of church and state in the US (Chaves 1999; Chaves and Tsitsos 2001). Research efforts are now turning to issues of comparative performance between faith-based and secular providers (Smith and Sosin 2001).

In the UK, all three main political parties entered the 1997 General Election making sympathetic noises towards faith-based organisations as providers of services. The election of New Labour, led by Blair and Brown, both members of the Christian Socialist Movement, created expectations of initiatives towards faith-based provision (Dale 2001). In reality, what has occurred has been a continuation of trends to delegate more to the

voluntary sector, but no initiatives specifically aimed at faith communities and certainly no suggestion that congregations are suitable providers of mainstream services. Blair has been particularly careful to speak in an inclusive way of all the faith communities present in the UK and the emphasis has been on consultation (Cameron 2001). Proposals to delegate mainstream service provision, such as schools, have been highly controversial and made little progress.

As research pre-dating the New Labour government shows (Cameron 1998; Harris 1998), a minority of congregations have been long-term recipients of state funding for small-scale services and a majority of congregations are engaged in welfare provision, albeit in a more low key way than in the US. More recent research fleshes out the nature and scope of congregation-based social action (Clark 2000; Finneron, Green et al. 2001; Sweeney 2001; Bacon 2002).

The unit of analysis in all the research cited so far has been the congregation, based either upon case studies or key informant interviews. The data presented in this paper provides the opportunity to look at the characteristics of those church attenders who get involved in their communities and within that, the characteristics of those attenders who engage in social action within their congregations.

#### *Volunteering literature*

Whilst in the US the link between religious participation and volunteering has been of interest for some time (Cnaan, Kasternakis et al. 1993; Wilson and Musick 1997; Park and Smith 2000), in the UK this interest is much more recent (Cameron 1999; Lukka and Locke 2001). The major survey of volunteering in the UK (Davis Smith 1997) includes a question as to whether the respondents volunteer in a religious context (48% volunteered and 22% volunteered in a religious context). Respondents were not asked if they had a religious affiliation nor were they asked whether faith was a motivating factor in undertaking voluntary work.

This paucity of references to religion in the UK volunteering literature means that the English Church Life Profile is an important source of data on the volunteering activities of church attenders.

#### *Social capital literature*

The recent exponential growth of literature on social capital makes it difficult to claim to have reviewed the connections between this concept and religious engagement (Greeley 1997; Schneider 1999). (Curtis, Baer et al. 2001) for example, look at the level of associational membership in 33 democratic countries and conclude that a multi-denominational Christian or predominantly Protestant religious composition correlates with high levels of voluntarism.

In the US literature, religion plays a key role in exploring the concept. (Putnam 1993)'s work on Italy sees Catholicism as suppressing social capital in some regions because it focuses on vertical relationships between priest and people rather than the horizontal ties of less observant regions. In his later gathering of data on the US, (Putnam 2000) sees

religion (including Catholicism) as largely beneficial in promoting ties of trust and reciprocity between citizens. In this later book, Putnam elaborates upon the concept, talking of bonding social capital, which binds socially homogeneous groups, and bridging social capital, which creates ties between diverse groups. Congregations are primarily very local organisations and so might be assumed to be more effective generators of bonding social capital. An attempt will be made to explore this issue using the data.

It is worth noting at this stage the close connection between the concepts of social capital, human capital and religion. (Coleman 1988)'s work stemmed from an attempt to explain why school performance (human capital) did not flow solely from socio-economic variables. He concluded that the networks and shared norms of the Catholic community (social capital) meant that pupils at those schools out performed their socio-economic equivalents.

The concept of social capital has been operationalised in many different ways for research purposes but a key variable in many studies is membership (Hall 1999; Cameron 2001). (Wollebaek and Selle 2002) argues that multiple affiliations are more important than active participation in generation social capital, whereas (Dekker and van den Broek 1998) argues that activism is significant. Congregations are the most prevalent membership organisations in the US and UK (not forgetting the substantial differences in religious affiliation in the two countries: US 40% and UK 10%). This makes the behaviour of their members of interest to researchers on social capital. The English Church Life Profile, whilst restricted to one nation of the UK and one religion provides the largest data set for tracking how indicators of social capital relate to this group of members. The paper makes some initial attempts at this task.

Having summarised the literature relevant to the community involvement of church attenders, I now move to a discussion of the methodology of the Church Life Profile and the data extracted for this paper.

### **Methodology**

The English Church Life Profile consisted of questionnaires targeted at adult attenders (aged over 15), children, clergy and church administrators. The five mainstream Protestant denominations that participated selected representative samples of their congregations to take part. Other congregations were able to opt into the survey. The attenders survey was administered at the end of April 2001 and most congregations chose to administer it at the end of their main worship service, getting people to stay behind and complete the questionnaire.

Some caution needs to be used in interpreting the figures, because of sampling limitations. Although the data set includes responses from over 107,000 people (aged 15 and over) representing over 2,000 congregations, it is only reliable at denominational level for the main sampling denominations (the Church of England, the Baptist Union of Great Britain, the Methodist Church, the United Reformed Church and The Salvation Army), although for these groups it is extremely reliable. Other groups contributed only relatively small samples, and these may not be fully representative. They can, however,

be treated as indicators, pending further research. Similarly, because the survey was initiated through Churches Together in England (CTE), it is essentially an English survey, although there is some limited participation from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, where churches have formed part of a denominational sample or for other reasons.

The data has been weighted to provide a balanced representation of the strengths of the participating denominations. For the five sampling denominations this weighting is accurate based on published denominational figures and detailed checks with denominational statistical records. For other groups a single weighting has been calculated, based on figures in *Religious Trends 2 and 3* (Christian Research). This masks the subtleties of differences between these groups, but avoids claiming the spurious accuracy of suggesting that a limited sample represents the whole group.

It is important to remember that the Roman Catholics did not participate and that they make up about one third of UK church attenders. The Independent and BME churches were also under represented in the survey although an attempt has been made to correct this by weighting.

A further definitional distinction needs to be discussed. The CLP is a survey of church attenders and not members. All those present when the survey was conducted in a congregation were asked to participate. 3% were visitors of whom two thirds were attenders at another church. The focus was on attenders because it is impossible to operationalise church membership in a reliable way in the UK. Each denomination defines the term differently and some denominations have more than one type of membership. The proportion of those who attend regularly without becoming members varies between denominations, as does the proportion of members who actually attend church. As a measure of social engagement, church attendance is a reasonable proxy for a membership that is fraught with definitional difficulties.

Limitations of time (the local reports were being produced as this paper was written) mean that no sophisticated statistical analyses have been conducted. We hope that by showing the potential of this data, others will seek to get involved in doing that. The aim in this paper is to look at the characteristics of those who engage with their community and see how this challenges or reinforces existing knowledge. The paper is doing no more than suggesting correlations. It could be that those who volunteer are more likely to join the church than the other way round. A hunch would be that linear causality is unlikely to be helpful in this context and that we are probably dealing with what Tom Schuller (Schuller 2000) calls 'spirality' or mutually reinforcing characteristics.

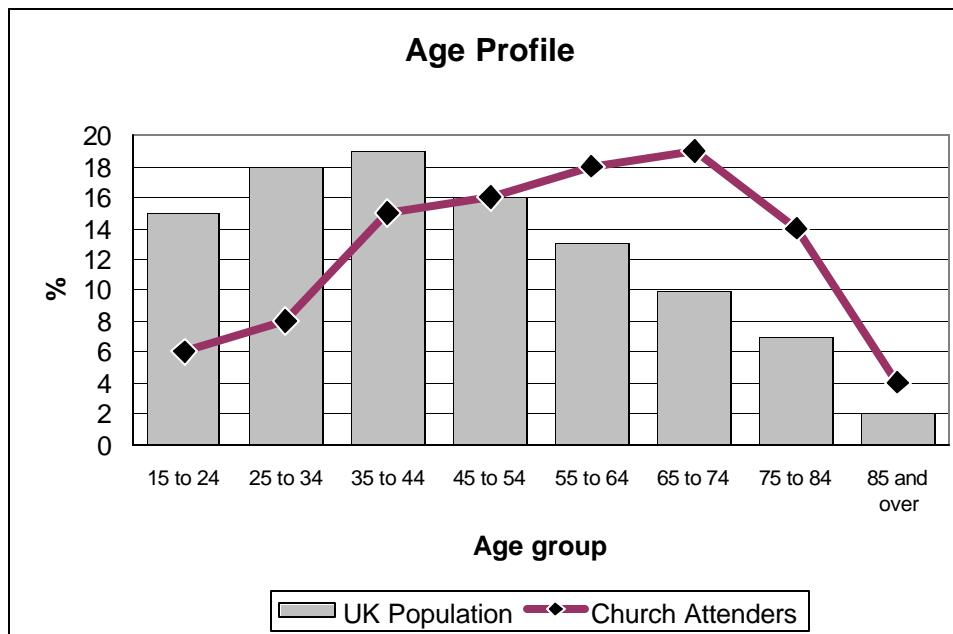
## **Data**

This section starts by demonstrating the main ways in which church attenders differ demographically from the UK population. It then moves on to compare the three types of community involvement using seven variables: age, gender, education, regularity of church attendance, roles undertaken in the congregation, engagement in informal helping or advocacy behaviour and the salience of God to the respondent.

### *Church attenders and the UK population compared*

The comparison is made using age, gender, education and economic status.

Church attenders are much older than the UK population. With the data currently available it is difficult to say whether this is because church attendance is more popular later in the lifecycle or whether subsequent generations are less likely to attend church than their parents. Given the pattern of long-term decline in church attendance in the UK (Currie, Gilbert et al. 1977), I would want to follow Putnam's (2000) argument that there are strong generational effects. Further analysis should reveal whether those who have recently joined the church cluster around particular age groups, which would help explore the lifecycle versus generational effect debate.



65% of church attenders are women compared with 51% in the UK population. The greater tendency of women to be religiously observant has long been recognised in the UK. (Brown 2001) attributes this to the feminising of piety in the evangelical revival of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century with church attendance becoming an important way in which women could demonstrate their good character and respectability.

The much higher levels of education amongst church attenders when compare with the population has come as a surprise. Only 10% of church attenders have no qualifications compared with 16.5% in the population. 32% of church attenders are graduates compared with 15.5% in the population. It could be argued that the method of administering the questionnaire might mean that those lacking confidence in their literacy would avoid participation. It could further be argued that the dominance of the mainstream denominations enhanced education levels. However, in the UK your chances of being a graduate correlate strongly with age, with younger people being more likely to

have graduated. The older age profile of church attenders reinforces the high qualification levels. There is a well-recognised correlation between educational attainment and social engagement but it is also worth remembering Putnam's thesis that as educational attainment has increased in younger generations, their level of social engagement has decreased. It could be argued that this data illustrates that thesis.

Given the age profile it is unsurprising that 42% of church attenders are retired and not economically active. Those who are economically active (aged 15 to statutory retirement age) fall into the following groups:

Employed	72%
Homemaker	11%
Student	9%
Early retired	7%
Unemployed	4%
Other	2%

(The total is greater than 100% because some people placed themselves in more than one category.)

Having illustrated the key differences between church attenders and the UK population, I now move to looking at the three types of community involvement using seven variables. Each sub-section will take a variable and show data for the three types of community involvement:

1. Whether the respondent holds a position of responsibility in the community
2. Whether the respondent is involved in church-based social action
3. Whether the respondent is involved in social action outside the church

#### *Age – see Appendix 1*

Holding a position of responsibility and social action outside the church are forms of involvement that peak in the 55-75 age range. Those aged under 45 are less likely to be involved in social action outside the church but more likely to be involved inside the church. In fact, the age spread for church-based social action is much more representative of church attenders than the other two forms which tend to be more prominent in older age groups.

#### *Gender – see Appendix 2*

Involvement in social action outside the church has a gender balance that replicates the portion of men and women belonging to the church. With church-based social action there is a slight over representation of men. With positions of responsibility in the community men are substantially over-represented. This may reflect the over-representation of men in leadership roles (Escott and Gelder 2002)(Table 6.13). It also reflects the more traditional gender relations that exist among church members when compared with the wider population. It is important to note that this data does **not** include clergy where the levels of male over-representation are much greater.

*Education – see Appendix 3*

Church attenders with professional qualifications, first and higher degrees are over represented amongst those with community responsibilities. This replicates the pattern amongst volunteers in general (Davis Smith 1997). Those with no qualifications are less likely to hold positions of responsibility. A similar but much less marked pattern is evident in those engaged in social action outside the church. Those with professional qualifications are most over represented and this is likely to reflect the need for such people on the management committees of voluntary agencies and projects. Those who engage in social action within the church are much more evenly spread over the range of qualifications and only those with no qualifications are substantially less likely to be involved. It is disappointing to see that those with no qualifications are as marginalised in the church as they are in wider society.

*Regularity of church attendance – see Appendix 4*

Church attenders with positions of community responsibility and who engage in social action outside the church, attend church at about the same frequency as church attenders in general. The slight exception is that those engaged in non-church social action are slightly more likely to attend more than once a week than those who do not engage in this way. Turning to those who engage in church-based social action, they are much more likely to attend weekly or more often: 95% compared with 77% of those who do not engage in this way. 38% of them attend church more than once a week, compared with 18% of those holding positions of community responsibility and 20% of those engaged in community based social action.

*Congregational roles – see Appendix 5*

This is a slightly more complicated data set looking at the range of responsibilities church attenders can hold within the local church. It seems a possible indicator of bonding social capital, showing how involved members are in activities that sustain the local church.

Any form of church role correlates with an attender being more likely to have a position of responsibility in the community. This is particularly so for the following roles: teaching/preaching; lead/assist at services; church oversight; church committee member. These are the roles that would be seen as most clearly leadership roles in the local church and suggests that people leading inside the church tend to take on responsible community roles. A similar pattern exists for those involved in non-church based social action with an interesting addition, that those involved in pastoral care roles in the church are over-represented in this group. This suggests that similar skills are being exercised within and outside the church.

For those involved in church-based social action, this pattern is accentuated with any church role correlating to a much greater chance of being involved. This suggests that those involved in church-based social action are already active in the church and that they are prepared to be active in a number of ways.

*Engagement in helping and advocacy – Appendix 6*

The CLP asked attenders to indicate whether or not they engaged in any of the following helping behaviours:

- Lent money
- Cared for a sick person
- Gave money to charity
- Contacted a public official or signed a petition
- Helped someone through a crisis
- Visited someone in hospital
- Made a gift to a person in need
- Cared for an elderly relative
- Helped a substance abuser.

In all three categories of community involvement those who were involved were more likely to have helped in these ways than those who were not. Again, it is important to emphasise these are correlations not causal explanations. An interesting difference between the three categories is that those who have positions of responsibility in the community and engage in social action in the community are more likely than other attenders to give to charity. Those who engage in church-based social action are no more likely to give to charity but are more likely to lend money and make a gift to a person in need. This could reinforce the idea, that in the UK, church-based social action is an extension of informal networks of pastoral care (Harris 1995).

*Saliency of God – See Appendix 7*

The final variable attempts to quantify the distinctive role that religion may be playing in the behaviour of church attenders. Obviously religious motivation is highly complex and one variable doesn't do the subject justice and can only be used as an initial indicator. Respondents were asked to rate the importance of God in their life compare to other things.

For those with positions of responsibility in the community and those engaging in non-church based social action, there was not much difference between their patterns of saliency and those not so engaged. Those with community responsibilities were slightly less likely to rate God as the most important thing in their lives (39%) and those involved in community-based action were slightly more likely to give this rating (43%).

For those involved in church-based community action a different pattern is evident. 65% said that God was the most important thing in their life and a further 29% rated God as more important than most things. It seems clear that attaching supreme significance to God and engaging in church-based social action are significantly correlated.

This section has attempted to present some initial findings from the English 2001 Church Life Profile. Simple correlations have been examined and further work is required to test the statistical significance of some of the relationships uncovered. Corrections for age

and education will be particularly significant. The next section attempts to draw together the data by identifying some themes.

### **Discussion**

Four themes emerging from the data are discussed: demographic, human capital, bonding social capital and bridging social capital.

#### *Demographic themes*

In interpreting this data it is important to remember the pattern of long-term decline in church attendance in England. This matches similar patterns of decline in other traditional service organisations.

<u>Service Organisations</u>	membership in 000s				
	1971	1981	1991	2001	
Round Table	29	30	23	13	↓
NSPCC	20	20	21	15	↓
PHAB	2	25	50	15	↓
Lions	8	20	21	19	↓
Rotary	50	59	65	59	↓
St John's	91	77	55	47	↓
Red Cross	172	112	82	80	↓
Hospital Friends	250	475	240	160	↓
British Legion	912	934	766	570	↓

Source: (Cameron 2001)

This data is important confirmation that unpaid work is as gendered as paid work and that where church members engage in their community they tend to follow gender stereotypes that are strongly present in their own leadership structures.

#### *Human capital themes*

The church parallels society in offering more opportunities to the better educated. Even with the efforts it devotes to religious education, these barriers are not overcome, even if they are less formidable for those who engage in social action at their congregation. Church members with higher qualifications are in demand in the community to fill positions of responsibility and work in community groups.

#### *Bonding social capital themes*

Although direct comparison with other UK measures of volunteering will be difficult, this data set indicates the high levels of activism amongst church members with 58% having a role in the church in addition to attending worship. For 14% this means having two roles and 16% have three or more roles (Escott and Gelder 2002) p25. It is also clear that nearly two thirds of church members belong to small groups within the congregation (Churches Information for Mission 2001). This shows a high level of activism even before community involvement is taken into account. With this level of interaction bonding social capital will be high. The indicators in Appendix 6 do not differentiate

between help offered to church members and non-church members but they do indicate that the social capital has a 'cash value' in helping behaviour.

### *Bridging social capital themes*

Although comparisons with the wider population are not yet possible it seems that church members have high levels of community involvement focused on people outside the church membership. 21% are involved in social action through their congregation. 24% are involved in service outside their congregation. 22% hold a position of responsibility in their community. Donating to non-religious causes is practiced by 61% of attenders. It appears that bonding and bridging activities are not mutually exclusive and that there is a high level of overlap between those who have church roles and those who are involved in their community.

### **Conclusions**

Church attenders are clearly engaged in their community in substantial numbers. Those who engage in church-based social action have particular characteristics:

- They are younger than other community activists
- They are less dominated by the well-educated
- They attend church more frequently
- They are more likely to give money informally as well as through a charity
- They are more than usually active in a wide range of church roles
- They attach a higher salience to God in their lives than other activists.

These characteristics need further statistical exploration but they also provide further directions for qualitative work on church-based social action.

Church attenders are clearly generators of both bonding and bridging social capital. The multiple networks they belong to both within and outside the church are reinforced by belief in God. This social capital has real value as demonstrated by the levels of informal helping and advocacy undertaken by those engaged in all three types of community involvement.

Finally, there is a high correlation between church membership and giving time. The church can be regarded as evoking exceptional levels of activism from its members. Two of the fastest growing membership organisations in the UK are the National Trust, with 1.5% of members volunteering for the organisation and the RSPB, with 8% of members volunteering.

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