

ENABLING AND COHESIVE OR IRRELEVANT AND DIVISIVE? THE ROLE OF CHURCH OF SCOTLAND CONGREGATIONS IN SCOTTISH COMMUNITIES

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INTRODUCTION

The present role of churches in Scotland is uncertain. Commentators report the declining significance of established religion within Scottish society, evident in terms of falling church membership and a reduced moral and political influence on the population. The churches' contribution to wider societal cohesiveness and inclusion is meanwhile subject to controversy, particularly in relation to the continuing debate about sectarianism in Scotland. Paradoxically, it is evident that faith groups are enjoying a growing political recognition, particularly in relation to government neighbourhood renewal strategies, where faith groups are regarded as primary developers of the social capital in local communities now seen as a vital determinant of regeneration policy outcomes.

Echoing the salience of faith groups within UK government approaches to neighbourhood renewal, The Church of Scotland's (2001) recent strategic vision document **Church Without Walls** both emphasises the importance of the local and relational processes which are the foundations of social capital, and acknowledges that building a 'church without walls' requires a renewal of the relevance of the Church within local communities and a strengthening of relations with other faiths.

This article presents the findings from a national study of Church of Scotland congregations. It assesses the extent to which the activities of congregations

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contribute to social capital in Scottish communities. The article identifies the challenges that congregations face in developing such a role and evaluates the impact of congregations on social cohesion. The article concludes by discussing the implications of the findings for both the Church and policy-makers in Scotland.

CHURCHES, SOCIAL CAPITAL AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

For many commentators, the present reality for Scottish churches is a struggle to be relevant to the majority of the population (Reid 2002; Walker 2002). They cite evidence of an increasing disengagement from traditional religious participation, demonstrated in declining church membership and attendance. Recent research shows that church attendance has declined over the past two decades because of both falling religious attachment (four in ten Scots no longer identify themselves as belonging to a religion), and lower rates of church going amongst the religious themselves. In 2000, only 35 percent of adults belonged to the Church of Scotland, less than a quarter of religious Scots attended church weekly, and only 14 percent of the population had volunteered for church-related activities in the previous twelve months (Park 2002; Paterson 2002).

Within this context, the Church of Scotland published its **Church Without Walls** report, setting out the Church's wider strategic vision (Church of Scotland 2001). The document explicitly argues that the Church works most effectively where congregations build relationships with the wider communities to which they belong, emphasising the importance of both the local and the relational in church work. This focus on local relations has a striking resonance with the Scottish Executive's recent policy emphasis upon achieving community renewal through ensuring that:

Individuals and communities have the social capital- the skills, confidence and support networks to take advantage and increase the opportunities to them.
(Scottish Executive 2002)

The centrality of social capital to achieving governmental goals reflects a wider policy focus on strengthening local social processes as the central element of sustainable neighbourhood renewal, based on the understanding

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that successful policy outcomes are more likely to be achieved in civically engaged communities (Social Exclusion Unit 2001; Putnam 1995). In the present authors' view, social capital ought to refer to the value of co-operation and networking existent in social relations, both between residents and between organisations in local communities. Its most prominent advocate, the US scholar Robert Putnam, defines social capital as:

The features of social organisation such as networks, norms and trust that facilitate co-ordination and co-operation for mutual benefit.
(Putnam 2000)

It is important to distinguish between two forms of social capital. Bonding social capital may be defined as thick social networks between like individuals (e.g. families), which enable people to 'get by', whereas bridging social capital comprises weaker but wider linkages between heterogeneous individuals which provide opportunities to 'get on.' Thus strong internal social networks within deprived communities do not necessarily equate to the presence of beneficial linkages between local residents and wider social institutions such as job markets or policy-making processes. The distinction between bonding and bridging social capital is also essential in studying the nature of relations between communities. This involves the recognition that strengthening social ties within groups can be a divisive process, through which strong internal community bonds may be formed around perceived differences to, and the exclusion of, others (Portes and Landolt 1996). Such concerns are particularly relevant to discussions of the influence of religious sectarianism on community relations in parts of Scotland (Devine 2000; Walker 2002). Sectarianism has recently re-emerged as a major political issue, evident in the Church of Scotland's own enquiry; the Nil by Mouth campaign; MSP Donald Gorrie's Bill on religious hatred; new Scottish Executive measures to reduce religious tensions at Old Firm football matches; and a re-ignited debate about denominational schools. In this context, the contribution, or otherwise, that churches make towards social cohesion and tolerance within a more diverse and multi-cultural society is under severe scrutiny. Distinguishing bonding from bridging social capital is also important in evaluating the extent to which the benefits of congregational activities are internalised or bring benefits to the wider community.

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Whilst social capital exists in relationships between individuals, it also defines the ability of people to work together more formally in groups and organisations (Fukayama 1995). Thus, the extent to which informal trust and co-operation in local communities is translated into strong institutional infrastructures, through organisations including churches, is crucial to the capacity of communities to generate both bonding and, particularly, bridging social capital (Temkin and Rohe 1998).

Curiously, the reported decline in religious influence in Scotland has coincided with a growing emphasis amongst UK policy makers on creating a wider and more strategic role for faith communities in generating social capital, particularly within regeneration initiatives (Sarkis 2001; Evens 2001). The social benefits of churches are also proposed by non-governmental commentators. William Storrar has written about the potential for religious traditions in Scotland to be utilised in creating a democratic culture of active citizenship in civil society, reflecting a wider recognition that churches constitute a central element of many nations' civic orders (Storrar 1999; Ammerman 1996). The particular importance of churches as civic institutions is argued for by Robert Putnam, who claims that congregations generate both what he terms civically relevant values such as public duty, compassion and concern for the excluded and civic skills such as association and organisation (Putnam 2000). Additionally, it is argued that churches provide a distinctive function in creating a sense of spiritual wellbeing, self-esteem and identity for individuals and communities (Ahmed 2001; Sweeney et al. 2001).

The renewed interest in the role that faith communities may play in policy delivery and community development in the UK is illustrated in recent research identifying the importance of congregations within community regeneration strategies (Musgrove et al 1999; Allen Hayes 2001; Lewis and Randolph-Horn 2001; Sweeney et al. 2001; Shaftesbury Society 2001). This interest is based upon a growing recognition of the range of community initiatives that faith organisations are engaged in and the synergy between these activities and government policy objectives relating to neighbourhood renewal, reinvigorating civic engagement and tackling social exclusion:

Faith communities have a significant contribution to make to neighbourhood renewal and social inclusion.
(DETR 1997).

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This advocacy of a role for faith communities is based on their perceived strengths, including: the fact they are relatively well-resourced; their links to their localities; their particular engagement in the most deprived and declining neighbourhoods; their support of marginalised and excluded individuals; and their wider contribution to the cohesiveness and identity of local communities (CSM 2001; DETR 1997; Inner Cities Council 2001; Ahmed 2001).

Despite this increasing political acceptance of a legitimate role for churches in achieving policy goals, the development of partnership processes has been problematic. There are concerns about the capacity of congregations to undertake a greater service delivery function. There are also ambiguities relating to whether churches should retain a distinctive status or become increasingly assimilated into the wider voluntary sector, reflected in often weak relations between churches and other voluntary organisations (Voluntary Action Manchester 1999). Churches have also raised concerns that, despite supportive political rhetoric, they continue to be discriminated against in community and voluntary sector funding mechanisms and excluded from partnership formation processes (Faithworks 2001; Shaftesbury Society 2001).

Finally, there appear to be contrasts in the rhetorical and practical political support given to faith groups between England and Scotland. Senior members of the UK government, including the Prime Minister, have given their personal recognition and support to a central role for faith communities in policy delivery (Blair 2001; Faithworks 2001; Dobson 2001), and this is reflected in an explicit recognition of a distinct role for faith communities in policy documents and mechanisms for facilitating their involvement (DETR 1997; SEU 2001). However, despite occasional acknowledgements of the role of churches in communities (Scottish Executive 1999), such supportive rhetoric is less prevalent in Scotland, either in the pronouncements of Executive ministers, or in policy documents, such as the Executive's recent Community Regeneration Statement (2002) which makes no explicit reference to faith groups.

The new devolutionary order in Scotland poses a challenge to the Church of Scotland (and other organised religions) to stake its claim to be heard (Walker 2002). An assessment of its contribution to building social capital in Scottish communities represents one element in evaluating the basis on which such claims for ensuring a continuing role for the Church within local

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and national policy processes may be made. The article now attempts to contribute to this debate by reporting findings from a national study of Church of Scotland congregations and discussing the implications of these findings for both the Church and policy-makers.

THE RESEARCH

The study was conducted between August 2001 and June 2002. A literature review and interviews with national church officers and policy-makers were undertaken to identify key issues and establish the policy context for the research. This contributed to the development of a national questionnaire of ministerial charges, which also included standard social capital related questions which have been utilised in previous research studies. The questionnaire achieved a forty percent response rate, representing 454 (one third) of Church of Scotland congregations and including responses from every presbytery area in Scotland. Much social capital research has focused primarily on formal structures and relationships, often in an urban context. As our questionnaire built on this work it reflects this approach. Although opportunities were provided for ministers to identify activities not covered by the questionnaire, there may be some limitations in its focus, particularly in capturing activities in more rural or affluent communities, which should be borne in mind in interpreting the results.

The information generated by the survey was utilised to identify and conduct a series of 19 case studies focusing on specific local church initiatives and individual congregations. A further four more detailed congregation case studies were conducted involving focus groups with ministers and Church elders; and postal surveys of congregation members and local residents who were not Church members (the total survey sample sizes for the four detailed case studies were 336 for congregation members and 148 for non-Church local residents). All the case studies were selected to provide a sample of congregations working in different geographical, social and political contexts, as well as highlighting particularly innovative or wide-ranging community development activities. The full research methods and findings are presented by Flint et al (2002).

THE CONTEXTS OF CONGREGATIONAL ACTIVITY

The survey findings affirm the concerns of commentators (Reid 2002) about the extent to which congregations reflect wider communities. Whilst a quarter of ministers felt their congregations to be very representative of the local population, compared to 13 percent who believed they were not very representative, the majority of ministers (61 percent) were more ambiguous, suggesting that their congregations were fairly representative. It could also be argued that congregations are to a degree primarily inward looking, as six in ten congregations reported the main focus of their activities to be member-orientated, whilst 16 percent had an evangelical emphasis. Only one in twenty congregations reported community activities to be their main focus (although a fifth of congregations reported all three of these activities as being equally important).

However, a half of surveyed ministers believed their congregation was a locally well-known and trusted organisation, with the other half of ministers believing their congregation to be partially known and trusted. The case studies found little evidence of intolerance or antagonism to the presence of churches in communities, with non-church residents having positive or neutral perceptions. However, many residents were also unaware of the involvement of churches in wider community development roles.

CONGREGATIONS' CONTRIBUTION TO SOCIAL CAPITAL

The survey asked a range of questions about various activities that congregations may undertake which potentially contribute to stocks of social capital within their local communities. Using responses to these questions, we generated a social capital score ranging from 1-26, signifying the extent of congregations' involvement in these activities, with 26 indicating the highest involvement levels. (For a full account of the way social capital was measured see Flint et al 2002.) These specific activities were collated into four categories:

- **Local Activities:** including provision of services and facilities, disseminating information, assisting integration and resolving conflicts within local communities.
- **Community Development:** including advocacy, involvement in local campaigns and empowering local people.

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- Community Relations: including relationships with other organisations, facilitating partnerships, building networks and establishing new community groups.
- Pride, Safety and Belonging: the extent of the congregation's involvement in activities that generate any of these elements of social capital in local communities.

The results shown in Table 1 indicate that on average, congregations were engaged in just under half of the identified social capital generating activities, although they were less likely to be involved in community development than other activities. This presents us with a half full or empty glass analogy. On the one hand, it could be argued that there is scope for many congregations to be far more heavily involved in these activities and that the potential of the Church in this area is not being realised. On the other hand, given the institutional size of the Church of Scotland, it can equally be claimed that these levels of involvement represent a very substantial contribution to social capital in Scottish communities. However, it is important to note that this survey provides evidence of involvement in activities rather than the outcomes of these activities in terms of quantifying the levels of social capital generated. Neither the size of a congregation, nor the presbytery it was located in, were found to be significant factors in levels of involvement.

Table 1

Average Social Capital Activity Scores (All Congregations, N=454)

	Maximum Possible Score	Average Score
Local Activities	8	3.6
Community Development	6	1.8
Community Relations	8	3.8
Pride, Safety and Belonging	4	1.7
Overall Social Capital Score	26	10.9

The range of individual scores in all four categories was 0 to the maximum score shown.

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The survey revealed that congregations in urban and deprived areas were, on average, involved in a greater number of social capital-generating activities than congregations in rural or affluent communities. These findings are consistent with previous research and support the current policy focus upon churches as crucial institutions in regenerating deprived communities. It is important to note that these results may partially arise from the particular construction of the questionnaire. For example the focus on formal structures in the research may under represent the importance of informal working in rural areas. Lower levels of certain types of congregational community development activities in rural or affluent areas may be explained by the relatively lesser scale and extent of social problems, resulting in a less developed organisational infrastructure being in place to address such problems. But the research identified a further explanation, namely that more affluent congregations may engage with issues of poverty or social exclusion in different ways. Many of these congregations reported that they were not required to tackle certain social issues locally and therefore devoted their energies accordingly. Several affluent congregations provided financial and volunteer support to other congregations in deprived parishes. A large number of more affluent congregations were heavily involved in international advocacy and support activities, particularly related to issues of poverty and debt relief. This indicates that congregations contribute to community development at different local, national and international scales. Whilst this study focuses on the impacts of congregations on the immediate local communities in which they are situated, this wider contribution to non-local communities needs to be recognised. It is also the case that many churches attract members from a wide geographical area as churchgoers increasingly choose congregations that most meet their own needs rather than attending their local church, again resulting in the benefits of congregational activities being dispersed between different communities.

CONGREGATIONS AND COMMUNITY INSTITUTIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE

A key finding of the research was that much of the contribution that congregations make to local social capital is generated through their members' participation in other (non-church) community organisations. A central issue here is whether members of congregations have a greater propensity for involvement in community organisations, and the extent to

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which the Church itself contributes to such involvement. Our survey of congregation members in three case studies (N=296) found that 30 percent were members of other local organisations (most commonly charitable or voluntary groups). These figures reflect the estimates given by ministers in the national postal survey.

Recent national estimates of levels of volunteering in Scotland have suggested that one in five adults is involved in a community or voluntary organisation (Scottish Executive 2000; Paterson 2002). On this comparison, congregation members appear to be proportionately more likely to be involved than the general population. Coupled with the fact that four in ten of the congregation members who reported being members of other community groups were office bearers in these local organisations, this suggests that members of congregations play a prominent role in the institutional infrastructure of their local communities.

A further question is the extent to which individuals' wider community involvement is facilitated by their membership of a congregation. Seven in ten congregations indicated that individuals in the church had gone on to be involved in other community organisations. Of course, this raises the issue of whether these individuals joined the church because they were natural participants in any case, or whether it is their involvement in the church itself that has facilitated their wider local engagement. Whilst it is likely to be a combination of these elements, the congregation membership surveys indicated that an individual's faith and the encouragement of the Church were important factors in their wider community involvement, suggesting that congregations do make a specific contribution here.

In addition to the role of individual church members, Table 2 shows that a significant number of congregations provide practical support to a range of local organisations, and voluntary sector organisations in particular. The most common form of support was the provision of meeting places (64 percent of congregations), providing staff or volunteers (44 percent) and offering financial assistance (39 percent).

Table 2
Local Organisations Supported by Congregations

Types of Organisation	Number of Congregations	Percent of Congregations
Voluntary sector organisation	268	59
Religious organisation	193	42.5
Community council/forum	187	41.2
Other community group	155	34.1
Resident/tenant association	70	15.4
Other	45	9.9

N = 454

The degree to which congregations are embedded within secular local institutional networks, however, appears limited. Table 3 shows that congregations were most likely to be involved in partnerships with other churches. Between a fifth and a quarter of congregations worked in partnership with charities and care organisations. A smaller proportion were involved in partnerships with community councils and only one in ten with local authorities. A quarter of these partnerships were focused on community development, and one in eight were regeneration-based.

Table 3
Congregation's Involvement in Local Partnerships

Partner organisation	Number	Percent
Other church	195	43
Local charities	108	23.8
Local care organisations	86	18.9
Community council	76	16.7
Local authorities	47	10.4

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Other organisation	28	6.2
Purpose of the partnership	126	27.8
Community events	115	25.3
Community development	111	24.4
Local care services	56	12.3
Regeneration	36	7.9
Campaigning activity	52	11.5
Other		

N=454

A DIRECT PROVISION ROLE FOR CONGREGATIONS

Much of the recent debate about the role of congregations in community development has focused upon the issue of churches providing direct services and facilities to local people. The extent to which the survey congregations were engaged in this is illustrated in Table 4. Two thirds (65 percent) of congregations directly provided educational, cultural or health services to local people, with children's clubs being the most frequent service, followed by creches, cultural events, transport services and day care clubs for the elderly.

However, only a quarter (27 percent) of congregations provided self-help and personal growth services, the most common being pre-school clubs, followed by addiction and parent support groups. Very few congregations provided employment or training services. A similar proportion of congregations (26 percent) provided direct services to local people in immediate need, most frequently support to the homeless, with smaller numbers providing food, housing or shelter to local people.

Table 4

Congregations Directly Providing Services and Facilities

Congregations...	N	%	More than 50% of users are non-members	More than 80% of users are non-members
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			(%)	(%)
(N=454)				
Providing educational, cultural, or health services to local people	290	65.3	72	36
Providing self-help and personal growth services to local people	118	26.9	84	64
Providing direct services to local people in immediate need	117	26.0	81	65

Although these findings suggest a modest role for congregations in direct service provision they also reveal that over seven in ten congregations reported providing these services to a majority of non-church members. One criticism of congregations is that the gains from their activities accrue to their membership, but may not generate external benefits for wider local communities, but these findings suggest that this is not the case.

Reflecting the findings discussed above, congregations have established very limited access routes to funding sources for these and other activities. Whilst one in five congregations received funding from the Church of Scotland for a specific initiative, only 13 percent received grants from local or national government, and less than one in ten received support from a religious or secular charity.

Table 5 shows that congregations are in general supportive of a greater role for the church in providing local services, and that a third would be interested in applying for government funding to facilitate this. Similarly, surveys of the membership of case study congregations showed a majority (53 percent) across the four case studies (N=355) wished to see more involvement in community development activities, with the remaining 47 percent wishing to maintain current levels of engagement. A very small sample of residents in these areas (N=148) provided indicative evidence that non-church members were not hostile to a greater role for congregations in service provision. Local community organisations were also positive in the main about the actual and potential contribution that congregations make.

Table 5

Congregations' Attitudes to Funding and Service Provision

	Number	Percent
Would congregation be interested in applying for government funding to provide services to local people?		
Yes	156	34.8
No	80	17.9
Not Sure	212	47.3
Should the church be seeking a greater role in the provision of services to local people?		
Yes	229	51.7
No	74	16.7
Not Sure	140	31.6

It should also be noted however that there was a great deal of uncertainty about the churches' future role in the direct provision of services. This is related to concerns about the capacity of congregations to undertake such activities, the appropriateness of local congregations performing this role rather than the national Church and disparate views about the respective roles and responsibilities of the Church and government (local and national).

The research also indicated that in many instances, congregations see their contribution as more usefully being that of enabling and supporting other local organisations already engaged in these services, as described earlier.

CONGREGATIONS AND SOCIAL COHESION

A key element of the recent debate about the role for churches is the extent to which they are a socially cohesive or divisive presence in local communities, particularly in relation to sectarianism in some areas of Scotland. 88 percent of congregations were involved in partnership work with other religious

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groups in their local area. Whilst this most frequently takes the form of joint services and worship and informal meetings, two fifths of congregations are involved in more formal partnerships.

Crucially, such collaboration is often on an ecumenical basis, with many congregations reporting attempts to reduce religious divisions in local communities through working closely with Roman Catholic congregations in joint services, public solidarity events and anti-sectarian education in local schools. In one case study parish in west central Scotland, a number of resident-survey respondents of all or no faiths spoke of benefits to community linkages arising from prominent inter-church co-operation involving the Church of Scotland Minister. The picture that emerges is of a strong ethos of inter-church working, rather than of isolated and divisive local institutions. Sectarianism, where it exists, may be largely perpetuated outwith congregations.

The case studies revealed that congregations often have strong links with other non-Christian faiths. In areas of Glasgow and Edinburgh, local congregations have been heavily involved in partnership working with Islamic and Sikh groups and in assisting asylum seekers, including facilitating the religious practices of other faiths. Many congregations also play a role in seeking to support and integrate marginalised groups within local communities. A third (34 percent) of congregations reported supporting young people, whilst a quarter of congregations supported vulnerable older people, people with physical and mental disabilities, and homeless individuals. One in ten congregations had actively attempted to resolve conflicts between sections of their local community.

Beyond this, many congregations also play a role in building a sense of community identity, through involvement in community events, gala days, history projects etc. Church premises themselves serve an important function here. Symbolically, they may represent a sign of community and continuity (particularly in declining communities), but also practically they offer a site for associational activity which is essential in generating interaction (both formal and informal) within communities. Six in ten congregations reported making a hall or meeting rooms available to local people. These figures do not inform us about the diversity of uses or users, but suggest that church premises have the potential to be more than 'street furniture'.

CONGREGATIONS AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

This article has identified that congregations make important contributions to the institutional infrastructure and social cohesion of many Scottish communities. However, their contribution to wider community development appears more tenuous and fragile, and this has important implications for how the role of congregations is conceptualised in relation to the aims of policy makers.

Table 6 illustrates that less than half of congregations had been approached to become involved in a local issue; only a third had acted as advocates for the community or been involved in local community campaigns;; and only a fifth had helped their local community solve a local problem.

A number of factors may explain this modest involvement in community development activities. Firstly, as we have suggested above, many congregations do not envisage such activities as being central to their role and function and this perception is also shared by many non-church organisations and individuals so that a church congregation may be ‘off-radar’ locally in relation to these issues. Secondly, these activities are inherently controversial or divisive. Congregations, attempting to appeal to all sections of their local community, find it difficult to simultaneously become involved in issues such as new housing developments or road closure proposals which may divide local residents. Thirdly, the issue of human, financial and knowledge resources is central. Many congregations expressed a desire to be more fully engaged in such community development issues, but did not believe they had the capacity to do so against competing priorities. Finally, such involvement may require both a redefining of the congregations’ remit and the development of new forms of partnership working with organisations which may have little understanding, at present, of Church priorities and working processes.

Table 6

Congregation’s Involvement in Community Development Activities

In the last two years has your church...	Congregations	
	Number	Percent

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Been involved in activities that help local people define their needs?	79	17.7
Helped local people to find a solution to a local problem?	95	21.6
Been involved in any local community campaigns?	135	35.6
Represented or spoken on behalf of the community to external bodies?	144	32.5
Been approached to become involved in any local issues?	206	46.5

However, widening and deepening congregations' engagement in community development may be crucial to the realignment of the Church's role, both amongst policy-makers and within local communities. Involvement in community development activities often provides the most visible indication to non-church members of a congregation's secular as well as spiritual local importance. In a dynamic process, this is likely to lead to other organisations perceiving a role for congregations in local networks. Involvement in community development can also enable congregations to evolve into new areas of activity that reflect the changing needs of their local communities. This research found congregations involved in local economic development, promoting tourism and establishing credit unions, to provide three examples where engagement in 'non-traditional' activities have renewed congregations' wider relevance to local communities.

CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Local and national policy makers face a number of decisions in determining the role for congregations in community development. Potentially the activities of congregations can be more effectively aligned with the aims of strengthening local communities. However, facilitating a greater role for congregations in governance processes involves reconceptualising their role, in which diversity and religious priorities need to be regarded as integral to, rather than in opposition to, wider policy aims of fostering social inclusion and cohesion. This requires an understanding that the spiritual and secular dimensions of congregational activity are inherently complementary

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components of the ability of congregations to contribute to local stocks of social capital. In other words, it is not possible to harness the benefits of congregational activities without recognising that these cannot be divorced from the religious priorities and practices of the Church.

This reconciliation of religion and social capital objectives should not be difficult. Fukuyama (1999) has pointed out that societal variations in social capital have their basis in religious heritage. Thus, the high level of voluntary activity in the United States of America is 'fuelled' by a particular tradition of sectarian, decentralised Protestantism. Furthermore, in relation to Scotland, Paterson (2000) has pointed out that in the nineteenth century religion popularised ideas of mutual responsibility and gave coherence to civil society, whilst in the twentieth century the welfare state was embedded in a civil culture 'imbued with a sense of Protestant responsibility'. Perhaps a modern version of such Scottish traditions should not be viewed as inappropriate or undesirable.

For both policy-makers and congregations, this involves retaining the unique identity of the Church whilst recognising that it represents one voice amongst many. This plurality suggests a reconfiguration of how the roles of congregations are conceived within policy processes. This research found that both church members and non-church organisations and residents were generally supportive of congregations pursuing greater levels of engagement within communities. However this support for greater engagement in very general terms does not address the diversity of specific theological beliefs and practices. Any government support for greater engagement of faith groups faces the difficult issue of defining what is 'acceptable' within policy partnerships.

The issue of 'bonding' and 'bridging' social capital is central here. The results provide somewhat ambiguous findings. The evidence, particularly from the case studies, suggests that congregations aim to act as forces of social cohesion rather than exclusion, including facilitating the integration of the most marginalised groups in society and working to tackle sectarianism and other social tensions. On this basis, the reluctance of policy-makers to engage with congregations due to their potentially divisive impact within local communities should be reassessed. Similarly, the finding that many congregations' provision of facilities and services primarily benefits non-members indicates a degree of bridging social capital. However, the predominance of partnerships between churches rather than other community

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partners, and the fact that a majority of congregations report their main focus to be member-orientated, reveals that much of the social capital generated by congregations remains 'bonding' in nature. There may also be tensions within congregations in balancing bonding and bridging priorities and activities. This is partly an issue of resources, but also of divergent views about what community activities should be supported, and the case studies revealed that more contentious projects, for example providing drug needle exchanges, may cause dissension within congregations.

There is scope for churches to be identified as potential partners or significant actors in a wider range of local and national policy initiatives than is presently the case. Practically, policy-makers could support the maintenance and renovation of church buildings as important sites of community interaction and activity for both church members and other residents. Further, they could facilitate funding mechanisms that enable congregations to more readily access funds to support community development activities, recognising that the centrality of faith to congregations' activities should be acknowledged and accommodated with appropriate funding safeguards, rather than being seen as a barrier to funding applications. The Church nationally can provide organisational support to such activities by ensuring that there is sufficient encouragement, flexibility and autonomy for congregations to engage in innovative (therefore risky) initiatives, combined with mechanisms to enable resources to be shared between congregations.

A strengthened role for congregations also requires the Church itself to rethink its role and processes. It is clear that the limited resources of local congregations necessitate their involvement in partnerships with others to secure the most effective contribution to local social capital. Whilst partnership inevitably involves compromise, the Church should recognise that successful partnerships can be entered into without a diminution of the Church's strengths, identity and priorities. In fact, our research found that the most successful partnerships had involved an explicit declaration and understanding of the priorities and values of the partner organisations at the outset. The current lack of partnerships between congregations and local authorities is caused as much by a lack of knowledge about each other's activities and processes than by overt hostility.

A related issue for the Church and policy-makers is that of whether congregations become more firmly embedded in the wider voluntary sector

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or continue to be regarded as a unique form of organisation. We would argue that a closer alignment with the voluntary sector would enable congregations to plug into existing circuits of support, funding mechanisms and communication channels to policy-makers, from which congregations are presently relatively isolated.

This study has revealed that congregations' contribution to social capital is as likely to be through the activities of individual members, and informally supporting other community organisations, than through direct provision or formal 'church labelled' activities. This suggests that policy should focus more on supporting congregations in this facilitating and enabling role, rather than concentrating solely on congregations' involvement in direct service delivery.

However, we would also argue that the Church itself should be aware that, whilst such informal partnerships are valuable, more formal partnerships should not be neglected. Similarly the continuing involvement of congregations in traditional community support activities should be coupled with a willingness to widen the engagement of congregations in other areas of community development such as community campaigning and advocacy. Congregations are less engaged in these types of activities, but such engagement is most likely to both empower local people and provide the most visible symbolic demonstration of the commitment and relevance of congregations to local communities. This is crucial as this research suggests that a lack of awareness of congregations' activities, amongst both policy-makers and local communities, contributes, more than any other factor, to limiting the engagement of congregations in local community development strategies in Scotland.

Churches face the task of redefining their identity in ways compatible with a highly diverse and unpredictable society (Walker 2002). Similarly policy-makers face the challenge of reassessing some of the assumptions about congregations that have limited a fuller recognition and understanding of their contributions to social capital in Scottish communities. At the same time, policy-makers have to identify how any greater engagement with congregations may be realigned and reconciled with the policy aims of fostering social inclusion and cohesion, and how the Church role fits into government relationships with a wide range of voluntary and community actors. These are far from insurmountable challenges.

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In the words of one interviewee, the Church of Scotland needs to 'move from being the heart of the community to being at the heart of the community'. The implications of such a change need to be more fully thought through if policy outcomes are going to benefit from the potential contribution that congregations (and other religious groups) have to make to social capital and wider community development in the new Scotland.

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