

CHURCHES AND SOCIAL CAPITAL: THE ROLE OF CHURCH OF SCOTLAND CONGREGATIONS IN LOCAL COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

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Executive Summary

1. Background

There is a growing interest amongst policy makers in the contribution that faith groups may make towards government objectives, particularly related to reducing social exclusion and supporting neighbourhood renewal. At the same time policy has highlighted *social capital* (the features of social organisation such as networks, norms and trust that facilitate co-ordination and co-operation for mutual benefit) as a crucial factor in successful policy outcomes. The Church of Scotland's recent *A Church Without Walls* document outlined an agenda for a renewed engagement of congregations with their local communities based around the importance of the *local* and *relational*, the fundamentals of social capital. It appears that there is a remarkable synergy between the aims of the Church and the government and an emerging consensus about how these aims are to be achieved. However, supportive rhetoric from policy makers towards faith communities has been less forthcoming in Scotland than elsewhere in the UK. Additionally recent commentaries have claimed the Church of Scotland to be an institution experiencing both a decreasing membership and a declining influence in local communities. Despite considerable research evidence from the United States, and a number of studies about the role of faith groups in regeneration initiatives in the UK, no study had been conducted in Scotland about the extent of congregations' contributions to social capital at national and local

levels. In order to address this deficit in the understanding of the role of the Church of Scotland, the Board of Social Responsibility commissioned a team of researchers from the Department of Urban Studies, University of Glasgow to establish the extent of congregations' engagement with their local communities, to identify the processes involved in congregations' contributing to local stocks of social capital and to identify issues arising from the research findings for congregations, the Church of Scotland and policy makers at the national and local levels.

2. About The Research

This research was funded by the Church of Scotland and was conducted by the Department of Urban Studies, University of Glasgow, on behalf of the Church of Scotland Board of Social Responsibility between August 2001 and June 2002. The research comprised five stages:

A Literature Review of existing research into congregations and social capital

Key Informant Interviews with members of the Church of Scotland, ecumenical organisations and local and national policy makers

A National Questionnaire Survey of Congregations, posted out to every Church of Scotland charge. A total of 454 were returned, a forty two percent response rate providing a sample representing one third of all Church of Scotland parishes

Vignettes involving semi-structured telephone interviews with nineteen congregations throughout Scotland engaged in specific activities identified as being particularly important in generating local stocks of social capital.

Case Studies of four Church of Scotland congregations, both urban and rural and involving focus groups, interviews with local organisations, and postal surveys of both church members and non-member residents.

3. Key Findings from the Research

- Church of Scotland congregations operate within very diverse local communities, both between and within parishes. This diversity suggests the need for flexibility, sensitivity and innovation amongst both

congregations and wider Church structures in their attempts to engage with local communities.

- Church of Scotland congregations are involved in a wide range of activities that generate benefits for local communities beyond their own congregations. Involvement in such activities also often generates beneficial outcomes for congregations themselves.
- Church of Scotland congregations are on average involved in half of an identified range of activities that may generate social capital in their local communities.
- Congregations in urban and/or deprived communities are involved in a greater number of activities than those in rural or affluent parishes. Congregations operating in ethnically diverse parishes have above average social capital scores. Neither the size of congregations, nor the presbytery they are located within are significant factors in determining their involvement in activities.
- Church of Scotland congregations provide a wide range of services and facilities to local communities. This is more likely to be through a facilitating and enabling role to other organisations rather than through direct provision.
- The spiritual, communal and secular dimensions of congregational activity are complimentary components of the ability of churches to contribute to local stocks of social capital.
- Church premises are vital sites of civic engagement in local communities.
- Congregations play an important role in disseminating information within local communities. Congregations have been less prominent in gathering information from their wider communities.
- The diversity of local communities provides both challenges and opportunities for congregations. Many congregations have played an important role in addressing this diversity through attempting to support and integrate the most marginalised individuals and vulnerable groups within local communities and have sought to increase general levels of social cohesion and levels of engagement that are crucial to social capital and successful community development. The impacts of these

congregations' activities have been substantial. However the survey shows that only a minority of congregations are engaged in these activities, indicating that many congregations who are not currently involved in community cohesion activities should develop such a role for themselves.

- The survey findings demonstrate the strength of inter-faith linkages and the commitment of Church of Scotland congregations to engage in ecumenical partnership working. The evidence indicates that the activities of local faith groups are far more likely to create and encourage a sense of social cohesion rather than foster divisions in local communities.
- Church of Scotland congregations are less engaged in community development activities such as defining local needs and involvement in local campaigns. However, such engagement is most likely to empower local people within decision-making processes and is often the most symbolic demonstration of a congregation's commitment and relevance to the wider, non-church community.
- The contribution of the Church of Scotland congregations to social capital is as likely to be achieved through the activities of individual members than through formal 'church labelled' activities. The church may well play an important role in facilitating and supporting the participation of their members in organisational activity locally. However, the reliance on these forms of engagement appears to result in a neglect of formal structures and in weak linkages between many congregations and other local organisations and agencies. The strength of such institutional linkages is a vital factor in the outcome of individuals' activities and therefore should be a priority for congregations.
- A significant number of newly established community groups are being generated by Church of Scotland congregations across the nation.
- Congregations play an important role in contributing to a sense of community within their parishes, usually through a celebration of diversity as well as of the common bonds between local people.
- Churches appear largely to be trusted local organisations. Four in ten congregations report that their relations with their communities have

improved or increased in the last two years, suggesting the dynamics of congregation-community relations are moving in the direction envisaged in *A Church Without Walls*. There is little intolerance to the presence of churches in communities. However, this is coupled with a lack of awareness amongst non-members about the activities of congregations.

- The majority of church members and non-members within the local communities studied supported a greater engagement of churches in their local communities, suggesting internal and external support for the *Church Without Walls* agenda. However, a great deal of uncertainty still exists within the Church about the desirability and feasibility of congregations engaging in a wider community development role and particularly in direct service provision. These ambiguous findings are related to differences in the perceived priorities, strengths and weaknesses of local congregations.
- Faith and mission and being trusted are reported to be the most important factors in enabling congregations to contribute to their local communities, whilst a lack of resources (financial, human and physical) and local apathy within wider local communities are cited as the factors that most inhibit greater community engagement.

4. Recommendations

Church of Scotland Congregations should:

- Conduct a review process of their activities, an audit of local needs and members skills and identifying wider perceptions of the church and local needs they may address.
- Recognise the importance of small-scale actions. An internal focus upon the structures, processes and external images of congregational life provides a starting point to further community engagement. Recognise the diversity and legitimacy of many forms of community activity
- Continue to support and encourage the activities of their individual members in community organisations and activities whilst at the same time facilitating more formal structures of communication and increasing interaction with local organisations and agencies. Such an approach is

complimentary rather than an alternative to the individual activities of members

- Recognise that whilst informal relationships are essential and often the traditional method of interaction within communities, they may not have the visibility and capacity to reach beyond existing circuit of communication. More formal 'church labelled' activities potentially increase the profile and accessibility of congregations as local organisations to be included and engaged in communal activities.
- Review the use of their church buildings where applicable. These are both of symbolic importance and are also crucial sites of civic engagement. Congregations should identify whether these premises could be further utilised by local communities (dependent on resources).
- Give priority to developing wider linkages for themselves and other local community groups, with other organisations and agencies beyond the parish. Such wider linkages are likely to increase the influence of local communities in decision- making processes

The Church of Scotland should:

- Combine a focus upon maintaining its unique identity with an explicit recognition that it represents one voice amongst many in local communities and should facilitate partnerships with local organisations and agencies
- Develop and facilitate a role for congregations at the centre of local communities that places local churches firmly within the wider voluntary sector, enabling the church to plug into existing circuits of communication and support from which it is presently relatively isolated. This can be achieved without any diminution of the Church's identity and particular strengths
- Continue to facilitate debates within the Church about the desirability and feasibility of congregation's increasing engagement in service provision
- Develop structures and processes, in line with *Church Without Walls*, that promote the autonomy and flexibility of local congregations, and enable

risk taking and innovation in attempts to develop new forms of community engagement

- Further develop structures of support between congregations, so that resources may be distributed in such a way that congregations who wish to undertake community development activities are not prevented from doing so by a lack of resources
- Address the issue of congregations' poor record of accessing mainstream funding sources by developing processes and structures that provide support and advice to individual congregations in application procedures. In tandem, it should continue to construct linkages to local and national government
- Recognise that partnerships with community organisations, agencies and local government may be successfully developed without endangering the priorities and identity of the Church

Policy makers should:

- Recognise the substantial contribution that Church of Scotland congregations make to social capital in Scottish communities
- Accept that wider messages of declining Church membership and influence disguise the crucial role played by many congregations in local communities, including the establishment of a significant number of new community organisations, premises, facilities and services
- Support the maintenance and renovation of church buildings, recognising their importance as existing sites of civic engagement
- Recognise the extent of multi-faith working between Church of Scotland congregations and other faith groups and identify the activities of congregations as largely supportive of wider social cohesion rather than sources of social division
- Facilitate funding mechanisms that enable congregations to more readily access grants for their activities and recognise that the centrality of faith to congregations' activities should be reconciled, with safeguards, within funding guidelines, rather than being a barrier to applications

Recognise the Church of Scotland as a potential partner or significant actor in a wider range of policy initiatives than is currently the case