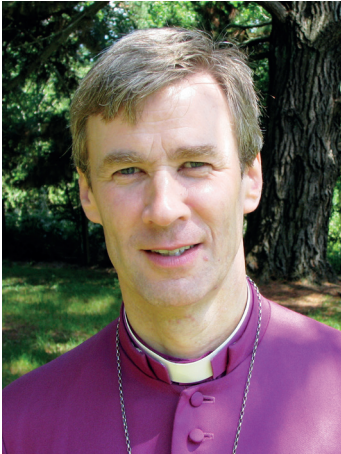




**CHURCH IN
ACTION:
A NATIONAL
SURVEY**

Executive Summary

Forewords



Rt Revd Tim Thornton, Bishop at Lambeth

The Church in Action report demonstrates how Anglican churches are working – often in partnership with other churches, charities, and private and statutory sector organisations – to respond to social issues and strengthen communities through providing opportunities for people to celebrate together, support one another, and develop new skills.

As well as the many organised activities churches run, such as lunch clubs for older people, parent and toddler groups, food banks and debt advice, this report reveals the extensive informal help and signposting that churches provide within communities. In addition it gives us, for the first time, a national picture of the advocacy and campaigning work that local churches are engaged in.

Seeking justice and loving mercy are central to the way of life that God calls us to, and which Jesus modelled for us. This report provides an encouraging insight into the ways these principles are being put into practice by churches across the country, as well as highlighting opportunities to bring our actions into closer alignment with our beliefs and intentions when it comes to social justice.



Paul Hackwood, Executive Director, Church Urban Fund

At the heart of the Christian faith is a concern with loving relationships: relationships between people, and relationship with God. It is through relationships that our awareness and understanding of social issues develops, and that ways of working together to resolve them are found.

Churches' long-term presence in local communities means they are typically embedded in – and actively nurturing – dense networks of relationships. As such, they have an important part to play in responding to the challenges we face as a society.

Church Urban Fund's Together Network supports churches across England in connecting with their communities, encouraging and resourcing them to work in partnership with other organisations and individuals to make a difference together.

There is room for growth – in compassion, in faith, in action, and in numbers – but this report portrays an active church committed to people and communities, giving us plenty of reason for hope, and inspiration for further action.



Introduction

This report explores the scale and nature of social engagement by Anglican churches in England, based on a survey of 1,094 church leaders conducted in September and October 2017.

Produced in collaboration between the Church of England and Church Urban Fund, this Executive Summary reports on the main findings of the research. A more detailed full report is available online: www.cuf.org.uk/publications

KEY FINDINGS

- Loneliness is the most widespread social issue according to the church leaders surveyed. More than three-quarters identify this as a major or significant problem in their parishes, with relatively little variation between the most and least deprived areas. Other social issues, such as homelessness, low education, and food poverty are much more concentrated in the most deprived parishes.
- The proportion of church leaders reporting that mental health problems are a major or significant problem in their parish has increased sharply from 40% in 2011 to 60% in 2017.
- 70% of churches run three or more organised activities for the benefit of their local communities, such as parent/carer and toddler groups, community cafes, lunch clubs for older people, holiday clubs and youth work.
- Churches in the most deprived areas are the most active in their communities in terms of the range of activities they run, with 34% of them running six or more of the activities listed (e.g. night shelters, debt advice, lunch clubs). Churches in more deprived areas are also more actively engaged in campaigning and advocacy on social issues.
- Informal help and active signposting to other organisations are important components of churches' social action. When these are included, most churches are involved in supporting people with mental health problems (83%), family breakdown (86%), and loneliness (94%).
- There has been a marked increase in partnership working in recent years, both between different churches, and between churches and voluntary, public, and private sector partners.
- There is often a gap between belief and practice, or intent and reality. Whilst 97% of clergy agree that 'engaging with the poor and marginalised in the local area is a vital activity for a healthy church', only 54% agree that 'tackling poverty is a fundamental part of the mission for our church'. Similarly, 88% of church leaders agree that 'advocating or campaigning for social justice is an important part of the role of local churches', yet only a third of churches are frequently involved in such activities.
- In terms of the relationship between social engagement, discipleship and church growth, 64% of church leaders agreed that 'community engagement has helped draw new people into the church' and 80% agreed that 'community work helps church members to live out and grow in their Christian faith'.

Methodology

This report is a joint research project by the Church of England and Church Urban Fund, based on an online survey of Church of England incumbents – the most senior members of staff in a benefice – a parish or group of parishes. Conducted in September and October 2017, we received 1,094 responses from clergy, representing a broad cross-section of the Church of England’s 6,831 benefices, including by region, size of congregation and across urban and rural locations with different levels of deprivation. This survey is the third in the series, following on from similar surveys conducted in December 2011 and September 2014.



Community life

The survey began by asking about the strengths or positive characteristics of the communities that churches were part of. According to church leaders, there is a strong sense of belonging to the local community in the majority of parishes, with 68% of church leaders agreeing that this was the case most of the time or almost always. Only a minority of clergy, however, believe that most, or almost all of the time, local people have opportunities to develop and use their skills.

Less deprived parishes, as well as more rural ones, are generally perceived to be stronger and healthier communities, suggesting that poverty has a detrimental impact on community cohesion. These findings point to important interactions between socio-economic well-being, relationships, and personal agency, and the need to attend to all three for communities and individuals to flourish.

Our survey also asked about opportunities churches were providing to nurture the strengths in their communities, recognising that they can make a positive difference by facilitating and encouraging people to interact with and support one another, and not solely by providing a service to meet a specific need.

Churches are very actively involved in strengthening local communities through providing opportunities for people to celebrate together, help others, use their skills, and mix with different groups. Churches in the most deprived areas are generally more active in community-building, particularly in terms of helping people to make a positive difference to others and encouraging people from different ethnic, social and faith groups to get to know each other.



“ 68% of church leaders say that there is a strong sense of belonging to the local community ”

Social issues and action

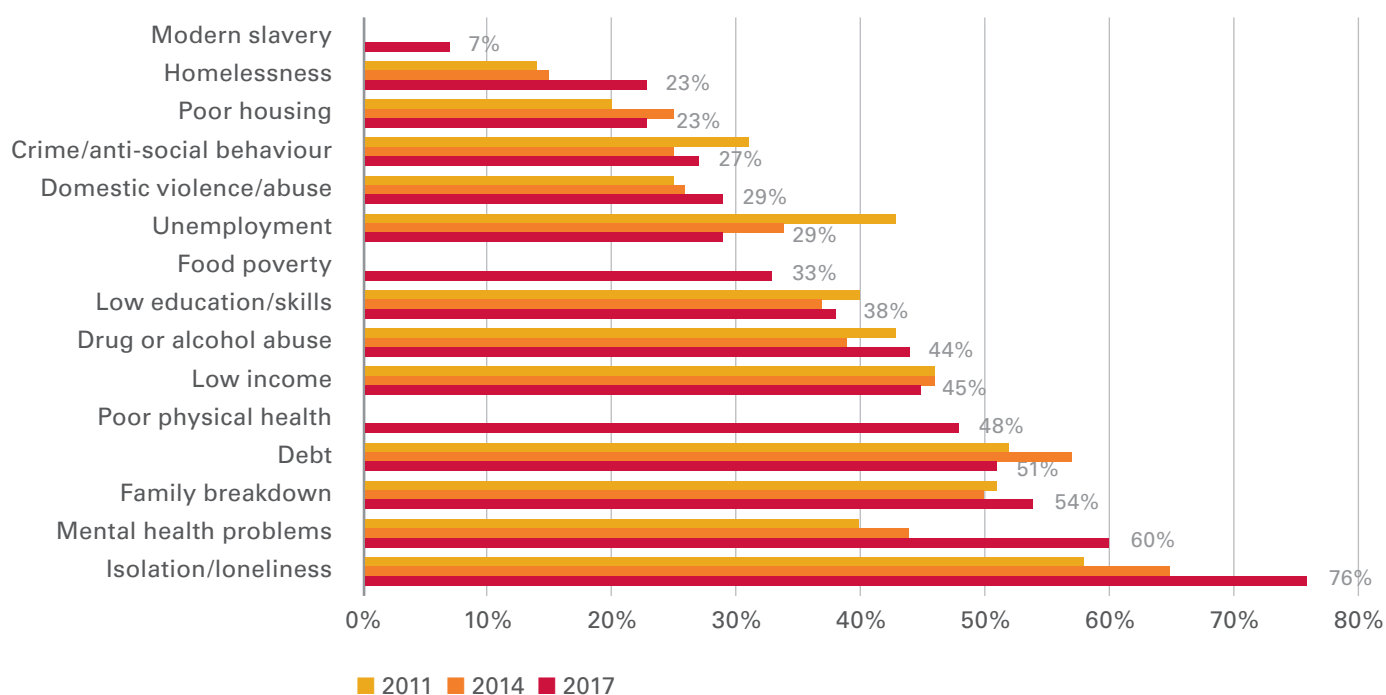
The most widespread social issue affecting local communities – reported by three quarters of church leaders – is loneliness. The other four most commonly reported issues are mental health problems, family breakdown, debt, and poor physical health, which are seen to be a significant or major problem in around half or more parishes. All of these issues are prevalent in less deprived areas, though even more so in the most deprived areas. Other social problems, such as homelessness, low education, and food poverty are more heavily concentrated in the most deprived communities.

The proportion reporting mental health problems as a significant or major issue has increased from 40% in 2011 to 60% in 2017 – and this change is very evident in both less and more deprived areas. Social isolation (up from 58% to 76%) and homelessness (from 14% to 23%) are also more widespread than six years ago, whilst unemployment is perceived to be less of a problem (down from 43% to 29%).

Clergy were also asked what their churches were doing to respond to the social needs in their local area, either by running an organised activity, signposting to other organisations or providing informal help. By virtue of their relational nature and long-term presence in communities, churches are often distinctively well-placed to support people in times of need, both in formal and informal ways.



Chart 1: Social issues identified by church leaders as a major or significant problem in their local area



*Data for 2011 and 2014 is not available in every case, because of changes to the list of issues in the survey.

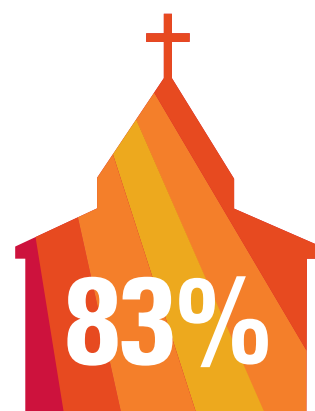
Social issues and action

When informal help is taken into account, 83% of churches are involved in supporting people with mental health problems, 86% with family breakdown, 90% with food poverty, and 94% with loneliness. With the exception of modern slavery, around half or more churches are doing something to address each of the issues listed in Chart 1.

The social issues that churches are most likely to be responding to through organised activities are loneliness (46%) and food poverty (40%). A substantial minority are also responding to homelessness (12%), mental health problems (10%), and debt (9%) through organised activities, although more churches offer support for these issues through active signposting or informal help. In the case of family breakdown, domestic violence and drug or alcohol addictions, churches are most likely to provide informal help.

Churches in the most deprived areas and in urban areas are typically doing more to respond to social issues affecting their communities, according to the measures used here. Larger churches are more likely to provide organised activities, but the differences by size of church are much less evident when informal responses are included.

When asked about a range of specific activities, the most common church-run activities are community events (80%), lunch clubs and other social activities for older people (69%), playgroups and parent-toddler groups (59%), community cafes (32%), youth work (30%) and holiday clubs or other organised activities for children (30%). 70% of churches run three or more of these organised activities, and a quarter of churches run six or more. The most active churches are larger churches in urban and/or more deprived areas.



“ 83% of churches are providing support for people with mental health problems ”





CASE STUDY: A COMMUNITY CAFE WITH A DIFFERENCE

“Nobody cares about us” – that was the comment that kept coming back from people when the Reverend Laura Leatherbarrow went door-knocking around her new parish. Halton View, near Widnes, has one of the highest suicide rates in the North West and, like many other parishes, has a growing problem with mental ill-health and social isolation.

Keen to show that the church did care, Laura, an ex-nurse, persuaded the PCC to open up the doors of St Ambrose church as a community cafe – ‘a safe space to meet new friends’ is how they describe it.

Every Wednesday, between 30 and 60 people come along for lunch, tea or coffee, homemade cakes and fellowship. People can join in the banter on one of the ‘noisy tables’ or play board games or do craft on one of the quieter tables. If they want to talk to someone, the vicar and a support worker from MIND are always available for a conversation in a private space. Anyone who wants further help can be referred to a trained counsellor, based in the church vestry.

The cafe attracts people of all ages – from young mums, some of whom are struggling with postnatal depression, through to older ladies including those who are bereaved and lonely, as

well as residents from the local nursing home who are suffering from early stage dementia.

Kelly*, who started coming soon after it opened says that The Sanctuary has been the difference between sinking and swimming: “I started coming a year ago - just a hollow shell. I could not face the world. My work life and family life were deeply affected by my depression. Then Mark* told me about Sanctuary, and asked if I could come along. I took a deep breath and walked in. From that moment on, my life has changed beyond belief. The support and the friendships I have, have given me my life back. I love helping where I can, and reaching out to people in the community. It’s given me a purpose in my own life.”

The Sanctuary has also had a dramatic impact on the life of the church and on its reputation in the local community, helping to boost the congregation even though that was not the aim. Average attendance at their weekday communion service has gone up from four to 18, and they recently celebrated the first baptism coming out of The Sanctuary - the child of a young woman who frequently attended the cafe throughout her pregnancy.

** Not their real names.*

Social issues and action

Churches also support these and other activities, such as food banks, debt advice, and night shelters, by hosting them and/or by providing volunteers, financial or in-kind donations, and pastoral or prayer support. For example, 93% of churches support food banks in one or more ways: 69% provide donations, 32% provide volunteers, 27% provide pastoral support, 19% run a food bank, and 8% host one.



Table 1: Organised activities run or supported by churches

	Runs this	Provides venue	Provides volunteers	Provides donations	Provides pastoral support	Any of the above
Community events	80%	39%	29%	16%	15%	94%
Food bank	19%	8%	32%	69%	27%	93%
Lunch club for older people, etc	69%	27%	30%	14%	22%	86%
Parent & toddler group/playgroup	59%	30%	24%	13%	20%	78%
Pastoral provision (e.g. Street Pastors, counselling, befriending)	21%	10%	34%	13%	32%	70%
Youth work	30%	19%	21%	14%	21%	57%
Community café	32%	15%	20%	11%	17%	53%
Activities for people with dementia	18%	13%	20%	8%	22%	53%
Holiday/breakfast/after school clubs	30%	14%	17%	10%	16%	52%
Budgeting/debt advice/money skills	8%	6%	13%	12%	26%	47%
Other homelessness provision	4%	3%	13%	24%	21%	47%
Fitness classes or sports activities	9%	35%	5%	3%	5%	45%
Night shelter	6%	5%	16%	19%	16%	38%
Parenting course	8%	7%	7%	4%	9%	25%
Employment support (e.g. job club)	5%	4%	6%	3%	10%	21%
Rehabilitation of ex-offenders	2%	4%	5%	4%	11%	21%
1 or more of the above	95%	70%	84%	81%	71%	100%
3 or more of the above	70%	38%	43%	32%	40%	97%
6 or more of the above	25%	13%	19%	11%	18%	82%

Partnership working

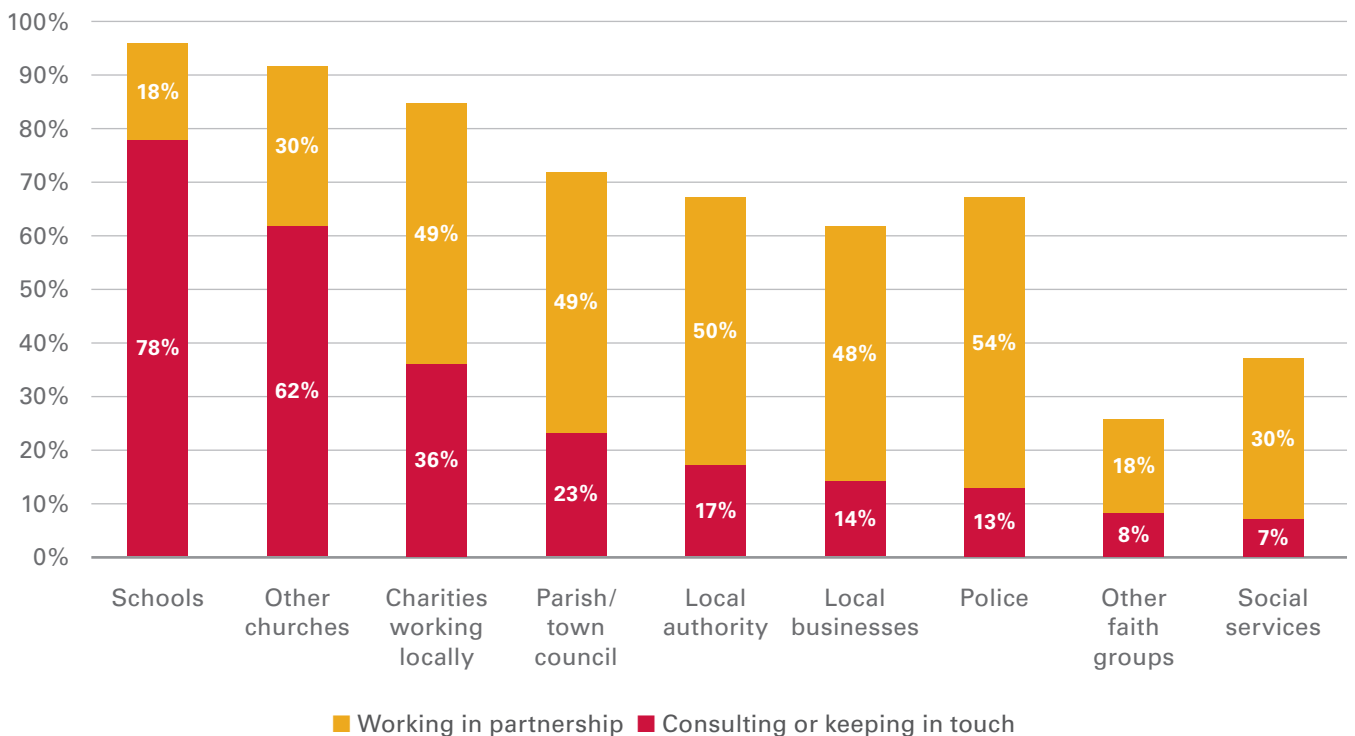
Many churches work in partnership with other local organisations, such as schools (78%), other churches (62%), and other charities (36%). The extent of partnership working has increased noticeably in the past three years, including with local businesses (up from 5% in 2014 to 14% in 2017), other churches (up from 41% to 62%) and other faith groups (up from 4% to 8%). Churches in more deprived areas are much more likely to be working in partnership with the local authority and police, as well as local charities.



“ Partnership working between churches has increased by 21 percentage points since 2014 ”



Chart 2: Partnership working between churches and other local organisations



Campaigning and advocacy

Another dimension of church social action is where churches take a stand against, or seek to influence, business and government policies or decisions that they consider to be unjust, such as the successful campaign against payday lending or local campaigns to stop the closure of post offices.

Most church leaders (88%) agree that 'advocating or campaigning for social justice is an important part of the role of local churches', with 43% strongly agreeing with this statement. This principle commands widespread support among churches in different contexts.

However, just a third of churches are regularly involved in the types of activity that are commonly associated with campaigning, whilst a further 50% are occasionally involved in some way. The most common means are through participating in local forums, lobbying MPs and local representatives, joining in national campaigns, and advocating on behalf of people in poverty.

Only a small minority of churches said they were 'enabling people experiencing poverty or injustice to have their voices heard in local or national debates', even though this can be a very effective mode of campaigning that empowers those in poverty to play an active role in developing more just policies.

Potential barriers to advocacy and campaigning by churches include the separation between faith and politics in the minds of some church members and possible disagreements about the importance or rightness of different causes.



Mission and social action

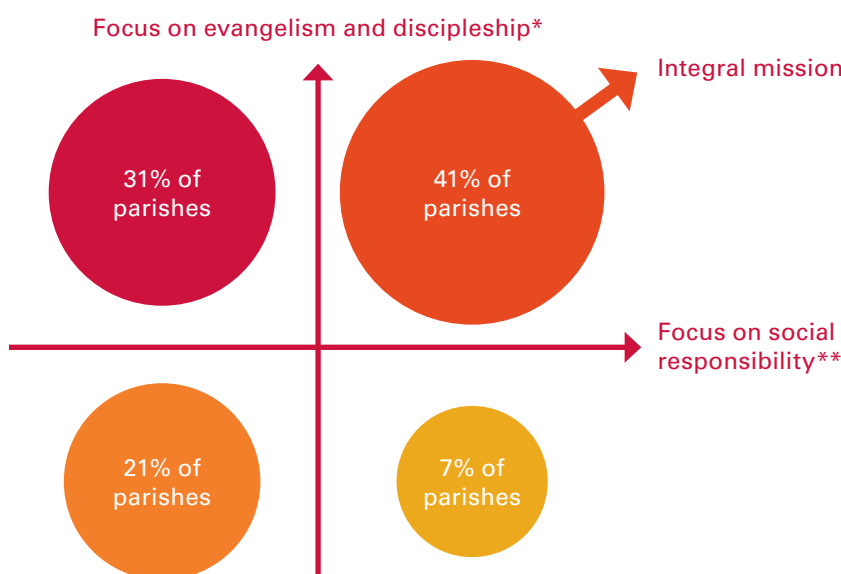
Nearly all church leaders (97%) agree that 'engaging with the poor and marginalised in the local area is a vital activity for a healthy church', and the proportion that strongly agreed with this statement has increased from 45% in 2011 to 61% in 2017. At the same time, just over half of church leaders (54%) agree that 'tackling poverty is a fundamental part of the mission for our church'. This leaves a large minority of churches for whom tackling poverty is not a fundamental part of their church's mission, even though engaging with the poor is recognised as vital to a healthy church. A disproportionate number of these churches are in wealthier and more rural areas, where poverty is less visible and tackling it might therefore be viewed as a lower priority than other aspects of church mission.

Around two-thirds of respondents report that their community engagement has helped draw new people into the church and 80% say that it has helped church members to live out and grow in their Christian faith. The churches that are most active in their community are the most likely to perceive the benefits of their community work in terms of church growth and discipleship. So, for example, 95% of leaders of

the most actively engaged churches say that their community work has helped church members to grow in their Christian faith, compared with 60% of leaders of the least active churches. The most active churches are also more likely to feature social justice issues in their teaching programme, helping people to make a connection between theology and practice.

The five marks of mission have been widely adopted within the Anglican Communion as an understanding of what contemporary mission is about. When clergy were asked about the priority their parish attaches to each of the marks of mission on a scale of 0-100, three of the marks – proclaiming the Good News (71 out of 100), nurturing new believers (65), and responding to human need (68) – scored significantly higher, on average, than the other two marks - transforming unjust social structures (41) and safeguarding creation (45). This ordering of priorities was the same across churches in all areas and of all sizes. Based on the clergy's own assessment, around 4 in 10 parishes fit a model of integral or holistic mission, whereby evangelism and social involvement are seen as joint and complementary expressions of the Gospel.

Figure 1: Priorities in mission



“ 68% agree that community engagement has helped draw new people into the church ”

*Score of 50+ (on a scale of 0-100) for proclaiming the Good News and nurturing new believers. **Score of 50+ for responding to human need and for transforming unjust structures or safeguarding creation.

Conclusion

There can be little doubt, from the evidence presented in this report, that Anglican churches continue to be highly engaged in the life of their communities, both in strengthening social ties and responding to social needs. Despite the wide-ranging and extensive activity identified in this survey, for many churches there remains a gap between belief and practice, or intent and reality, when it comes to engaging with social issues. This suggests that more could be done, particularly to help churches where poverty is less evidently 'on the doorstep' to find creative ways of engaging 'at a distance'. This would be to the benefit of the wider community, but also to churches themselves. Amongst church leaders in parishes where churches are already very active in their communities, there is almost unanimous agreement that this helps church members grow in their faith, and draws people into the church. This points to the valuable place of social action and community engagement at the heart of the integral mission of the church.



AUTHORS AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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