

KEY QUANTITATIVE FINDINGS:

GROWING CHURCH THROUGH SOCIAL ACTION: A NATIONAL SURVEY OF CHURCH-BASED ACTION TO TACKLE POVERTY

This report is based on a national online survey of around 900 Anglican clergy, looking at the extent to which churches are meeting poverty-related needs in their communities, the priority they attach to this work, and the impact on church life. Commissioned by Church Urban Fund and conducted independently by Christian Research Consultancy in collaboration with the Church of England's Research and Statistics division, this research is part of a larger project exploring the link between social action and church growth. The findings from an in-depth qualitative study of a small group of actively-engaged and growing churches are published separately. This is a summary of the quantitative study. The key findings are:

- Most churches in the survey are already engaged in organised or informal activities to address poverty-related needs in their communities, especially social isolation, low self-esteem, and family breakdown. More than half the churches are involved in schools work, parent and toddler groups, and care for the elderly and around a third are involved in youth work, food banks and counselling.
- However, church leaders also identified substantial unmet needs in their local community. In relation to unhealthy lifestyles, unemployment, debt, low income, lack of basic skills and benefit dependency, around a quarter of clergy identified a significant or major need in the community that is not currently being addressed by their church.
- 93% of church leaders agree that “engaging with the poor and marginalised in the local area is a vital activity for a healthy church”, yet only 44% say that “tackling poverty is a fundamental part of the strategy of our church”. The main barriers to doing more are seen to be a lack of volunteers, leaders and funding, although the churches that are doing the most are often not particularly large or wealthy. Among churches that are currently doing little or nothing to meet significant local needs, “lack of passion within the church” and “not knowing where to start” are cited as barriers by a large minority.
- The majority of church leaders believe that tackling poverty locally contributes to a more outward-looking church, a deeper understanding of God’s purpose and improved relations within the church and with the wider community. Churches that are doing more to meet local needs are much more likely to experience these benefits than churches that see local needs but are not responding, and they are also more likely to be growing. This confirms the findings from our qualitative research.
- Three in four leaders think that their churches should be doing more to tackle poverty in their local area and seven in ten are planning to increase what they do over the next five years. Counter-intuitively, the more a church is already doing to respond to local needs, the more likely it is to feel that it should be doing more.

BACKGROUND

This research is part of a larger project exploring the link between social action and church growth. Our in-depth qualitative study of eight church leaders found that churches that are actively engaged in tackling poverty become hubs in the local community, attracting worshippers and volunteers, as well as funders and other local organisations. The purpose of this quantitative study is to test these findings on a much larger sample of church leaders. 865 Church of England clergy took part in our online survey in December 2011 – a response rate of 30%. These churches are broadly representative of Anglican churches in England in terms of churchmanship, location, and size of congregation.

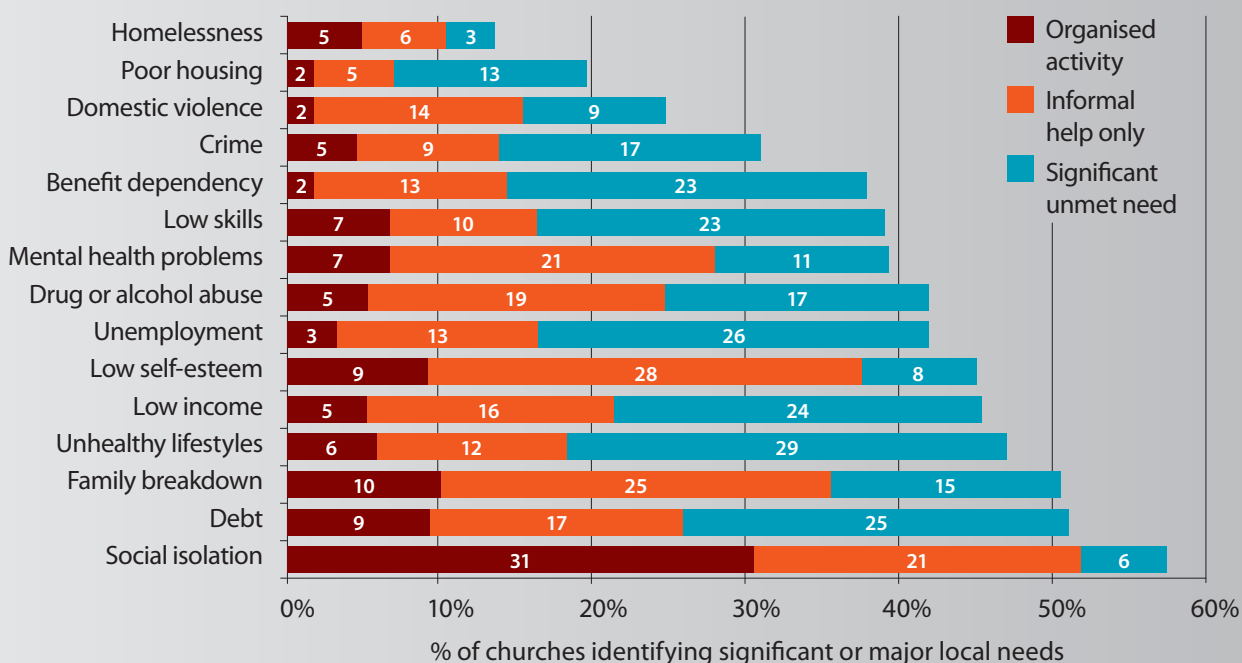
RESPONSE TO LOCAL POVERTY

Church leaders were asked about a range of poverty-related issues: the extent to which these are problems in their parish and what, if anything, their churches are doing to serve the people affected, either through “organised activities” and/or “informal help to those who come to us” (see chart below).

Around eight out of ten church leaders identified at least one significant or major poverty-related problem in their parish. The average number of problems (out of a possible 15) is 6, rising to 14 in areas with high and widespread deprivation. The most commonly identified needs are social isolation, debt, family breakdown, unhealthy lifestyles, low income and low self-esteem.

Most churches are already doing something to address some of the needs in their community, either by offering organised activities or, more commonly, informal support. When asked about specific types of activity that may help people affected by poverty, more than a half of the churches surveyed mentioned schools work (73%), parent and toddler groups (64%) and caring for the elderly (59%). Around a third of churches mentioned youth work with the wider non-church community (35%), food banks (33%), and counselling (31%).

MANY CHURCHES ARE ADDRESSING SIGNIFICANT NEEDS IN THEIR COMMUNITIES, BUT THERE ARE SUBSTANTIAL UNMET NEEDS...



However, there are substantial unmet needs in nearly all parishes, especially in the most deprived areas. For example, only 3% of churches offer organised activities to address a significant problem of unemployment in their parish and only 9% of churches offer organised activities to address a significant problem with debt, though many churches provide informal help to people affected by these issues. In relation to unhealthy lifestyles, unemployment, debt, low income, lack of basic skills and benefit dependency, around a quarter of clergy identified a significant or major need in the community that is not currently being addressed by their church.

Seven in ten churches anticipate doing more to alleviate poverty over the next five years, especially in the area of family breakdown/poor parenting and debt; those already doing the most are the most intent on doing even more (85%).

BARRIERS TO DOING MORE

Nearly all church leaders (93%) agree that “engaging with the poor and marginalised in the local area is a vital activity for a healthy church”, yet only 44% say that “tackling poverty is a fundamental part of the strategy of our church”.

The main barriers to doing more are seen to be a lack of volunteers and a lack of leaders (in each case, 64% of leaders said this hindered them “to a large extent”), pressures on church leaders (58%) and lack of finances (55%). Among churches that are currently doing little or nothing to meet significant local needs, “lack of passion within the church” and “not knowing where to start” were cited as barriers by a large minority.

Whilst lack of funding and volunteers is undoubtedly an issue in many parishes, our qualitative research found that with strong leaders who take risks and work proactively with other local organisations, the resources needed for community work often follow. This is supported by evidence from our survey which finds that the churches that are doing the most to meet local needs are much more likely to “take risks to help those in poverty” than churches that are doing nothing to meet local needs (65% vs 12%). Actively-engaged churches are also more likely to be led by clergy who have strong leadership qualities and who are good at networking and building relationships. These churches are disproportionately found in deprived inner city areas, but vary in size, income and churchmanship.

IMPACT ON CHURCHES

The majority of church leaders believe that tackling poverty locally contributes to a more outward-looking church (79%), a deeper understanding of God’s purpose (76%), and improved relations with other local organisations (71%), the wider community (71%) and within the church (57%). A significant minority make a direct link between tackling local poverty and increased levels of giving (33%) and growing numbers of worshippers (28%). Churches that are doing more to meet the needs of their community are much more likely to experience these benefits than churches that are aware of local needs but are not responding to them (see table overleaf).

In the qualitative study, church leaders were clear that their work to serve the community was not done with the primary aim of growing the church, though in all but one case, their churches had grown substantially. The church leaders who took part in this survey may also have been reluctant to make an *explicit* link between social action and church growth. But, when asked separately about how the size of their congregation has changed over the previous five years, it is clear that the churches doing most to serve those affected by poverty are much more likely to be growing. Conversely, only a tenth of the most active churches have declined in numbers, compared with nearly a third of churches that are not doing anything to meet local needs.

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CHURCHES THAT DO THE MOST TO TACKLE POVERTY ARE HEALTHIER...

Tackling local poverty has helped the church...	% agreeing by level of church activity*			
	Inactive churches	Low activity churches	Medium activity churches	High activity churches
become more outward looking	53%	76%	87%	92%
gain a deeper understanding of God's purpose	53%	72%	83%	90%
improve relationships with local organisations	49%	65%	85%	89%
improve relationships with local people	47%	68%	80%	87%
deepen relationships within the church	28%	54%	59%	79%
increase levels of giving	25%	27%	37%	45%
increase the number of worshippers	21%	17%	32%	51%

* Inactive: some significant needs, but none being addressed (9% of churches); low activity: 1 or 2 significant needs being addressed (28% of churches); medium activity: 3 to 6 needs (25% of churches); high activity: 7 or more needs (19% of churches). This excludes the 19% of churches who said there were no significant or major needs in their parish.

Our survey shows that churches that are doing more to address local needs have closer working relationships with other local agencies, such as the police, social services and other local charities. They are also more likely to attract volunteers, are more likely to be helping and advising other churches on tackling poverty and are more likely to be giving to other local charities. This confirms the findings from our qualitative research.

Overall the survey strongly suggests that churches that are most actively engaged in serving those impacted by poverty in their communities tend to be healthier and more attractive than others, and that the churches which are least healthy are those that are aware of significant local problems but are doing little or nothing in response.

FURTHER INFORMATION

A copy of the full report, prepared by Benita Hewitt from Christian Research Consultancy, is available as a free download from www.cuf.org.uk/research, along with the findings and full report from the in-depth interviews with leaders of churches that are known to be actively involved in tackling poverty. For more information about this project, please contact Tom Sefton at Church Urban Fund (tom.sefton@cuf.org.uk).